

Crisis in the Church: Unbelief

By Tom Hill

Bible Text: Matthew 17:14-21

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Matthew 17 records the miraculous healing of a demon possessed boy. It occurred after the disciples had failed to cast out the demon. Upon His descent from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus healed the boy.

This account gives a clear picture of the Church of Jesus Christ today. The demon possessed boy illustrates the world. The disciples depict the Church.

Their inability to help the sick child portrays the helplessness of the Church to influence the world today. As they failed, so has the Church.

Evidence for the Church's failure emerges from at least four areas:

1. the defection from the Church;
2. the disavowal of cardinal Biblical doctrines;
3. the difference from the New Testament Church;
4. the discord of the Church with the commands of Jesus Christ.

Without question or fear of contradiction, the Church desperately needs spiritual revival. Thus, the Church faces a crossroads.

It can continue in its present downhill path. Or it can correct from its present path to seek spiritual reformation and revival.

A proper understanding of the truths taught by this miracle will help to bring the needed and longed for revival.

What caused the disciples to fail? They, too, wondered at what was behind it. Thus, they came to Jesus and asked Him.

Matthew recorded the response from Jesus in Matthew 17:19-20:

“Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? {20} And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.”

The question that they asked is the same question that the Church faces today. For like them, failure confronts the Church, too.

From this passage, I want to examine some particular absolute truths about the disciples' unbelief and how it applies to the Church of Jesus Christ and your life today.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will clarify for you the truth, convict you of its need in your life, and correct you to revolutionize and transform your life. I pray that it will lead to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in revival in your life.

The disciples' assumptions

In chapter 10 of his book, Matthew wrote of the disciples' assignment to go and cast out demons. At that time, Jesus gave them power to cast out demons and to heal all kinds of disease.

Matthew did not set down the account of their mission. But Mark did. He wrote a short comment about the success of their mission in Mark 6:12-13:

“And they went out, and preached that men should repent. {13} And they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them.”

The disciples experienced a successful mission. They had authority over devils and demons. They healed the sick.

What rejoicing they must have shared as they saw God's mighty power flow through them.

When they faced the father and his sick son, no doubt they must have approached it as they had previous situations. After all, they had cast out devils and demons on previous occasions.

Brimming with self-sufficiency, self-confidence, and perhaps a touch of self-satisfaction, they tried to cast out the boy's demon.

They went into action and followed the steps that had formerly produced success. But, on this occasion, nothing happened. The boy was not cured. He remained the same.

I wonder how many times they tried to cast out the demon before they admitted failure. Indeed, they finally had to admit they could not cure the boy. They had failed.

In their attempt to cure the boy, the disciples made three false assumptions:

1. they assumed that they knew how to solve the boy's ills;
2. they assumed that what had always worked previously would work this time;
3. they assumed that they could count on the power that had accompanied them in the past.

Obviously, they were wrong.

Jesus' answer

Jesus gave them a short answer to their question. They could not cast out the demon from the boy because of their unbelief.

Before examining the real reason, I think it worth while to become aware of what Jesus did not say.

For example, He did not categorize the boy's problem as an insurmountable problem. It was not beyond cure.

He did not criticize them for failing to adapt to cultural conditions and solutions. He did not blame their failure upon their neglect to follow current methodology, programs, or solutions.

These exclusions have particular emphasis to the Church and perhaps even to your life. Remember, the sick boy pictures the world, and the disciples depict the Church. The failure of the Church today emulates their failure.

Too often, Church leadership identifies these exclusions as the cause of the current failure in the Church. If the Church would fix these areas of Church life, all would be well, they say.

It has become increasingly popular for Church leaders to advise and implore the membership to depend upon these "fixes" for the direction of the Church.

Sadly, these apparent answers not only do not work. They drive the Church away from the truth.

Instead, Jesus clearly identified the disciples' problem: unbelief. They failed to fully trust God to do what only He could do. They fell short of full and complete reliance upon God alone and nothing else.

In like manner, the Church fails today because of unbelief. It seeks for aid from the manners and customs of the world. The Church lacks full and complete faith in God alone.

Unbelief in the Church results from many causes. Sometimes it fears the crowd of the culture. Or perhaps it boasts in its abilities and past successes.

Regardless of its cause, unbelief fails to account for several crucial factors:

1. the necessity of God's power to effect spiritual life;
2. the extent of God's power;
3. the requirement of personal preparation for spiritual warfare;
4. the helplessness of human abilities and their enmity against God.

The importance of faith

Faith reveals three essential assurances. It believes that God has spoken in His word. It considers what He has spoken as true. Finally, it knows that God will act according to what He has said.

Faith forms the basis of everything in the Christian life. It furnishes the foundation of all that the Church accomplishes. It links mankind with the power of God. In Matthew 17:20, Jesus explained how much a small amount of faith can accomplish. It can move mountains and cast them into the sea.

In fact, the Scriptures declare that God requires faith as the basis of pleasing Him. All else is sin. The following two references clearly make these statements.

Romans 14:23: "...for whatsoever is not of faith is sin."

Hebrews 11:6: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

Because the disciples did not believe God, they failed. In like manner the Church fails today in its attempts to cure the ills of mankind because of unbelief.

The consequences of unbelief

Unbelief always causes spiritual failure. It lies at the root of all sin. Unbelief reveals three sad effects.

Unbelief blinds the eyes. It hides the truth. It obscures the true condition of others. Further, it conceals the true condition of self.

Unbelief causes dependence upon human effort. It gives place to the world, the flesh, and the devil. It directs reliance upon personalities, programs, and procedures, instead of upon God.

Unbelief prevents God's supernatural power. Instead, it boasts in human ability, ingenuity, and enterprise. Despite claims to the contrary, unbelief leaves God out of plans and purposes.

The failure of the disciples exhibits all of these effects. As a result, their unbelief caused three problems:

1. an inaccurate diagnosis of the boy's problem. Jesus distinguished between devils with His statement, "...this kind..." The disciples missed it entirely.
2. ineffectual solutions to the boy's problem. Again, Jesus showed the necessity of a particular solution when He said, "...but by..." The disciples had relied upon business as usual.
3. insufficient power to cast out the demon. Jesus revealed the need for special power to remove the demon when He called for "...prayer and fasting..." The disciples made no such search for God's power.

Thus, they met abject failure. Similarly, the Church of Jesus Christ and perhaps even you meet failure today because of these same consequences.

The Church has inaccurately diagnosed the problem of mankind. It has proposed and implemented ineffectual solutions that have proven false. As a result, it lacks God's glorious presence and power, which alone can cure the ills of mankind.

All of this results from the same root cause: unbelief.

What can the Holy Spirit accomplish in your life today with these truths?

First, He can comfort you with them. As you read them, perhaps you agreed with these truths from God's word. It reaffirmed the truth in your heart and mind.

As a result, you found comfort for your conscience, faith for doubts, and hope for uncertainty.

Second, He can clarify for you the truth. These truths reveal the Biblical doctrine to believe about the spiritual failure of the Church, perhaps even in your life. I pray that the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes to understand and believe the truth.

Third, He can convict you of sin. The truth of God's word rebukes the doubtful. Where has the Holy Spirit identified today your failure to apply these truths in your life?

Does your attitude and behavior resemble that of the disciples? Do you, too, practice self-effort and self-righteousness? Do you conform to the manners and methods of society?

Do these truths mold and shape your life? Are they evident in your life? Do you doubt God's word and His power? Do you misunderstand the necessity of faith?

What conclusions about your conduct and condition has the Holy Spirit revealed to you today?

Has He found you faithful or doubtful? Has He approved or reproved? Has He called you innocent or guilty?

As the Holy Spirit brings a revelation of the truth, He also brings a recognition of sin. The consequences of sin affect you in four areas:

1. you lack God's glorious presence and spiritual power;
2. you rob God of the glory He deserves, degrade His character, and dethrone His sovereignty;
3. you grieve and quench the Holy Spirit by rejecting His work in your life;
4. you minimize the work of Jesus Christ for you and in you.
5. set you free from doubts and fears, from ignorance and error, and from the wiles of the devil and the power of evil;

I remind you that God examines the heart and is not fooled by the outward appearance. I pray that the Holy Spirit has shown you your true condition before God and the necessity of His supernatural work to apply these truths in your life.

Fourth, He can correct you from sin. He rebukes you of sin in your life that He may reprove you from sin.

The example of the disciples shows sinful practices to shun. God disapproves of sin and judges all sin, large or small. It separates you from Him and breaks your fellowship with Him.

I remind you of two references from the Bible that clearly show these consequences.

Isaiah 59:1-2: "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: {2} But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear."

1 John 1:6: "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:"

I pray that the Spirit of God will drive you to Jesus Christ for relief.

Fifth, He can conform you to the truth. Through repentance, the Spirit wants to adjust your thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and actions to God's word. He wants you to trust Him to do exactly as He said He would do.

He wants you to distrust self and deny self that you might glorify God and exalt your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Finally, He can complete you unto good works. The reaffirmation and revelation of the truth, rebuke of sin, reproof from sin, and repentance from sin has one goal in mind: spiritual reformation and revival.

How will you respond to these truths. You can reject them by taking refuge in lies that keep you from faith and obedience.

If you reject them, remember what will happen to you:

1. you stand accountable to God for your sin;
2. you suffer the consequences of your sin;
3. you sustain God's judgment for your sin;
4. you sense the removal of God's presence.

Remember God's requirements:

1. personal holiness, faith, and obedience to His word;
2. immediate repentance from sin without delay.

I pray that the Holy Spirit has shown you your true condition before God. I pray that you will experience the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life today. I pray that He will bring you to repent of your sin.

May the He come to you in grace and bring a spiritual transformation in your life today.