

# Is Christianity Failing?

*“When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”—Luke 18:8*

**ACCORDING TO A PEW** Research Center study published in December 2021, those in the United States who identify themselves as “religiously unaffiliated” are dramatically increasing in numbers. As part of the research study, a survey found that, whereas 16% of American adults claimed no religious affiliation fourteen years ago in 2007, by 2021 the number had grown to 29%, nearly doubling.

The Pew study also noted that although Christianity is still the widely dominant religion in the United States, its once rock-solid footing is slipping in a marked manner. In 2007, 78% of adults identified themselves as Christian. By 2021, that number had declined to 63%. Another interesting observation is the tracking of people who describe themselves either as atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular,” as far as religious persuasion is concerned. Fourteen years ago, this group was outnumbered by Christians by nearly 5 to 1. Today that ratio is close to 2 to 1, according to the Pew research.

The above-cited results are only a sampling of what seems to be the trend of nearly a worldwide decline in Christianity. Hence, the question of our title. Is Christianity failing in its oft-stated mission to convert the world, and beyond that, of leading mankind to peace and prosperity? To many, this seems to be where Christianity is heading. As sincere students of the Bible, how should we view these perplexing conditions?

A correct answer to the question as to whether Christianity has been successful or is failing first depends upon a proper understanding of what constitutes Christianity, and just what God intended it should accomplish in the Earth. Christ is presented to us in the Bible as the Savior of the world; and the logical conclusion is that God had planned for the world to be converted to him, and thus to be saved from death. However, nearly two thousand years have passed since Jesus came to Earth to die for mankind, and yet the world is still far from being converted. Christianity in general is rapidly losing ground, and whole nations have set themselves against religions of various kinds. Are we to judge from this that God's plan, centered in Jesus, has failed?

The disciples, in Jesus' day, based their hopes in his Messianic kingdom upon the prophecies of the Old Testament. Doing so, in the main, was correct. They failed to understand, however, that the time had not then come for the establishment of that kingdom. Just so with most professing Christians since then: their belief that God had planned the conversion of the world through Christ and the church is correct, but they have failed to see from

the Scriptures that this is not the age in which God purposed that this work should be accomplished.

The immediate disciples of Jesus failed to note from the prophecies that the Messiah must suffer and die as man's Redeemer before the promised kingdom blessings could come to the world. Similarly, professed Christians have failed to see from the Scriptures that the true church of Christ must suffer and die with him before having the privilege of sharing with him in the future kingdom work of converting and blessing the world of mankind. The Apostle Paul states this matter clearly, saying, "If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."—Rom. 8:17,18

### **CHRISTIANS FOLLOW JESUS**

This is in reality what Jesus himself taught his followers. For example, he said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." (Matt. 16:24; Luke 9:23) That these were to follow him all the way into death is made positive by the resurrected Jesus' words to the church recorded in Revelation 2:10, which reads, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." This faithfulness implies fortitude in the face of suffering and persecution, and is shown by Jesus' further promise, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."—Rev. 3:21

When the divine commission was given to the church to go into all the world and preach the Gospel of the kingdom, the purpose was distinctly stated to be that of giving a witness. (Matt. 24:14) This witness was not intended by God to conquer the world, but to result in the preparation of individual Christians for the future work of reigning with Jesus. This is made clear in Revelation 20:4. We quote: "I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, ... and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years."

If the mission of Christians in the world has been that of converting all during the present time, then we might indeed think that Christianity has been failing. We see, however, that true Christianity has not failed; it is merely the false hope of many professed believers that has not materialized. When we see that the present mission of the church is one of sacrifice and suffering rather than one of conquering and converting the world, many puzzling questions are at once cleared up.

For example, many have wondered why it is that faithful Christians have usually suffered more than unbelievers. Why, after Jesus came as the light of the world, did mankind soon plunge into a long period of darkness, which we now refer to as the Dark Ages? Have we ever pondered why there are many more nonbelievers in the world today than a century ago? Who has not wondered about questions of this nature? Many, as a result of their wondering, have concluded that Christianity is a gigantic charade, and that this supposed foundation and bulwark of civilization has signally failed to make good its claims.

## WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

A popular idea of Christianity has been that one becomes a Christian in about the same manner that they join a civic or social club, and that this constitutes a type of safeguard against divine wrath that otherwise would send the individual to a terrible place of torment at death. Hence it has been supposed that God wants everyone to become Christians so they might escape this terrible fate. Now that it is being discovered, in the fuller light of the present day, that the nightmare of eternal torment is not taught in the Bible, the way is thus becoming clear for a better understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

The word Christ, being a Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, is used in the New Testament to connect Jesus with that glorious array of Messianic promises found throughout the Old Testament. The first of these promises was given in the Garden of Eden when God said that the seed of the woman would bruise the serpent's head. Another, and more specific promise, was given to Abraham when he was told that through his seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.—Gen. 3:14,15; 12:1-3; 22:16-18

Jesus, the Christ, came into the world as the seed of promise to be the one who would bless all humanity. (Gal. 3:16) The Scriptures show that those who become true Christians by following faithfully in his steps of self-sacrifice, even unto death, are to be a part with him of the promised seed.

The Apostle Paul, writing to Christians of his day, said, "If ye be Christ's [Christians], then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Gal. 3:29) In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul

says that Christ “is not one member, but many.” (I Cor. 12:12,14) A very important point for consideration is presented by the apostle in these two statements. They show that in the selection and development of Christians, God is merely carrying on a preparatory work in connection with the future Messianic purpose to bless all nations. It means that God has not been trying to make all mankind Christians at the present time, but merely selecting a few from among the nations to be associated with Jesus in his future work of blessing the entire world, both the living and the dead.

### **CHRISTIANS SELECTED INDIVIDUALLY**

Who are these Christians today whom God is selecting to reign with the Messiah? In what church will we find them? God is the judge as to just who they are. Specifically, a Christian is one who, having recognized that he was a sinner, and alienated from God, has repented, and who, through faith in the shed blood of Christ, has made a full consecration, or dedication, of his time, talents—all that he has—to the Lord, and is faithfully endeavoring to carry out that consecration. Denominational church membership has nothing whatever to do with it.—Rom. 5:1-3; 12:1,2

In the fifteenth chapter of Acts there is a revealing account concerning the divine purpose in the selection of the faithful Christians of this age. Here the apostle explains that “God at the first did visit the Gentiles [Greek: nations],” not to make all of them Christians, but “to take out of them a people for his name.” After this, declares the apostle, divine favor will return to Israel, and the broken-down

“tabernacle of David” will be restored. Then, he says, “the residue [remainder] of men,” and the Gentiles, will have an opportunity to “seek after the Lord.” First, however, as the apostle states, must be completed the work of taking out a people for his name, the bride of Christ, to be made up of all fully consecrated Christians.—Acts 15:14-18

When we see that God does not intend that all the world, in this age, shall become Christians, it helps us to appreciate many passages of the Bible that heretofore have been very difficult to understand. For example, in Revelation 5:10 we are told that the future reign of Christ and the church is to be associated with the Earth. How could this be true if all except the church are to be taken away from the Earth and tormented forever in a burning hell? Over whom, then, would the saints reign here on the Earth? These difficulties vanish when we realize from the Scriptures that the world is to be blessed, not cursed, following the completion of the true church.

Viewing the matter thus, we can see that God’s plan of human salvation provides an opportunity for all, both the church and the world. This does not mean that all are to be saved irrespective of their own cooperation or participation in the divine arrangements. The Scriptures distinctly point out that all who sin willfully after having come to a full knowledge of the Truth are to be punished with everlasting destruction, but not everlasting torment and misery, as many have believed.—Acts 3:22,23

## **THE TRUE CHURCH’S REWARD**

Another interesting point, in connection with God’s selection of the church to be associated with

Christ in his Messianic kingdom, is that such faithful Christians are to have a higher reward than the world in general. God's provision for the world is that they shall be restored to life upon the Earth—a "restitution of all things," and "that which was lost" when our first parents sinned. (Matt. 6:10; Acts 3:20,21; Luke 19:10) To the Christian, however, the Master gave the promise, "I go to prepare a place for you, ... that where I am, there ye may be also." (John 14:2,3) The church is to have a heavenly reward, but it is not God's purpose to take all mankind to heaven.

The prospect of everlasting life through the shed blood of the Redeemer is the blessed hope set before both the church and the world in the Bible. The scriptural presentation is not that of heaven for the righteous and eternal torture for the wicked. Rather, it is that of life, whether on the heavenly or earthly plane—or the cessation of life, which is death.

The first man, Adam, disobeyed and lost life as the penalty for sin; but eventually Jesus came as man's ransom, or corresponding price, and offset that penalty by his own death on the cross. (Rom. 5:12,18,19; I Tim. 2:5,6) As a result of this, the world once more will be given the opportunity to live. This opportunity will in due time come to all; but during this present Gospel Age, fully consecrated Christians are the only ones who actually have an opportunity to benefit from the death of the Redeemer. These, because they follow Jesus in laying down their lives sacrificially, are to be rewarded, not only with life itself, but with immortal life. These are they who "seek for glory and honour and immortality." (Rom. 2:7) The obedient of the world of mankind,

during the future Messianic kingdom, will also be given an opportunity to live, but the life they receive will be the restored perfect human life on earth, which was forfeited by Adam. The obedient will then live everlastingly, not because they will become immortal, but because God will continue to sustain their lives by his manifold provisions.

## **WHY THE WORLD IS NOT CONVERTED**

The work of true Christianity has thus far been that of preparing the future joint-heirs with the Messiah for the great work of his long-promised kingdom. It is little wonder, in view of this, that the attempted work of converting the world has made so little progress throughout the Christian era. The Creator knew that, from the human standpoint, Christianity would appear to be a failure. In our opening text, Jesus himself, in referring to the end of this age, said, "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8) Thus the fact that relatively few in the world today really believe in the Bible is no surprise to God. His beloved Son Jesus, the Redeemer of the world, foresaw this very condition, and foretold it. This is another good reason why we should have faith in what the Bible says.

The hundreds of divisions among the so-called Christian churches likewise were foretold in the prophetic Word. Paul said that there would come a great "falling away" from the true faith, and this most certainly occurred. (II Thess. 2:3) If Jesus and his apostles were a group of deceiving men, bent on putting over some selfish scheme for the purpose of favorably influencing the whole world of mankind,

would they deliberately predict that it would not be long before their entire scheme would fail and they themselves become laughingstocks in the minds of millions of people? Such pessimistic predictions would not be very encouraging to the early believers, nor induce very many to join the movement. Worldly wisdom would say, “Paint the future as bright as you can, or else you will never make many converts.”

Jesus and the apostles were not guided by worldly wisdom. They fully understood that the purpose of preaching the Gospel in this age was not to build up large and imposing church organizations. They knew that God did not intend that the mere preaching of the Gospel now would lead the world to the feet of Jesus. They foresaw that while a “little flock” of true Christians would be gathered and prepared for the future work of blessing the remainder of mankind, many of the glorious truths the Master taught would be distorted, and that, as a result of this, Christianity would appear to go down in defeat.—Luke 12:32

How glad we are, however, that true Christianity has not failed. God’s plan for this age is being successfully accomplished, and now this preparatory work for the new kingdom is about completed. Indeed, there is much scriptural evidence to show that the period set aside in the divine purpose for the call and preparation of true Christians to reign with Jesus in his Messianic kingdom is nearing its culmination. We rejoice, then, to consider the prospect that we have almost reached the end of this age and the beginning of a new one, in which the foretold blessings of peace and life will be dispensed to a dying world.—Isa. 25:6-9; 35:5-10; Rev. 21:3-5