

Ole Time Religion?

Matthew 10:34-42

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March 8, 2020

Several years ago, I sat on a swing with my father-in-law looking across a dirt road into a field that he used to plow with a mule when he was a boy.

As we sat in the shade, he asked, "Can you imagine walking behind a mule all day in weather as hot as this?" as sweat beaded on top of his bald head.

Between bites of his tomato sandwich, he told me how he and his siblings grew up on that farm in the 1940s.

Along with his father and four brothers, he got up with the crowing of the rooster, ate breakfast, and worked in the field until 11:30. The dinner bell would ring to indicate that his mother and sister had lunch ready, and the mule would pick up the pace, knowing that a break for the farmer meant a break for him too.

After a hearty meal and a brief nap, it was back to the field until sundown.

As Papa told me of the hard work, I had to admit that I could not relate to physical work that hard as a way of life, year in and year out.

Looking out across that field, I visualized him and his brothers stacking bunches of peanuts by hand on a pole to dry. I could see the old stationary peanut picker that had been pulled in the middle of the field, awaiting the boys who would bring the dried peanuts on a sled pulled by the mule.

Into the loud combine would go the peanuts, pulling the nuts into a hopper and spewing residue out the other side, which was then pitchforked into a primitive hay-bailer ran by a single worker.

I imagined myself working the bailer. I could feel the dirt sticking to my sweat and the dust finding its way into my eyes and lungs. Even though it was hot, I'd be wearing a long sleeve shirt. Otherwise, the dried stems of the peanuts would leave scratches on my arms. I could feel the pull on my back as hay bales were hoisted onto a trailer and transported to the barn. And they call those the "good ole days?"

You and I sometimes talk about the "good ole days," but not many of us want to go back to them.

Most of us will trade a pressure cooker for a microwave oven and riding lawnmower over a sling blade any day.

Sometimes we even talk about the good ole days at church.

We even have a song about the good ole days.

“Give me that old-time religion/ give me that old-time religion/give me that old-time religion/it’s good enough for me.”

It’s a good song, but do we mean it?

How many of you would rather sit through a sermon on a hard wooden bench in 90-degree heat, fanning yourself with a funeral home fan to keep the gnats away?

How many of you would rather we baptize in the cold waters of the creek instead of the warm indoor waters of the baptistry?

How many of you would like to feed the preacher and his family every Sunday afternoon?

I wouldn’t eat much, but you probably wouldn’t want to run down a chicken in the yard on Sunday morning, pluck it, cook it and serve it.

I tell you something else you don’t want. You don’t want the ole time religion that Jesus’ disciples lived with either. You and I have it made compared to the lives of Jesus’ disciples.

We live in the Bible belt. It’s still seen as a good thing to be a Christian here. But culture-wide, the media runs from mentioning faith issues unless there is something negative to report.

Movies rarely make persons of faith the main character unless they have some kind of neurosis.

Television only shows faith in times of death or crises or with a negative focus.

Newspapers usually have a weak commitment to reporting about issues of faith.

But compared to the days of the first century, or even in other parts of the world today, Americans can decide to follow Jesus with relatively peaceful results.

In the first century, being a follower of Jesus was not socially acceptable. People looked at followers of Jesus with suspicion.

When riots occurred in Rome in AD 46, the emperor Claudius blamed the riots on the followers of ‘Chrestus,’ the Latin word for ‘Messiah.’

Christians were expelled from the city.

Christians became a target and were portrayed as people with weird religious ideas and were believed to be a threat to the safety and security of the Roman state. But that still happens to people today.

On Dec. 30, Pastor Wang Yi was sentenced at the Intermediate People's Court of Chengdu City, Sichuan Province after a secret Dec. 26 trial.

Pastor Yi is the pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church, one of the best-known house churches in China. Its meetings around the city regularly attracted more than 800 people each week. Pastor Wang himself has been a prominent campaigner for greater religious freedom. In 2018, he wrote a declaration signed by hundreds of Chinese pastors, which includes a statement of Christian beliefs and a call for an end to the persecution.
(<http://www.prisoneralert.com/>)

He was charged with “instigating subversion of state power” and “illegal business management” for being the senior pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church. Along with the nine-year sentence, he was sentenced to deprivation of his political rights for three years plus a \$7,000 penalty.

Is this the ole time religion that we sing about?

Jesus told his disciples that there would be persecution for their beliefs. Most of them died a martyr's death.

Jesus said, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:35).

But we know that Jesus' ministry was not built on violence of any kind. Even so, his peaceful message spawned resentment, hatred, and violence against him and those who followed him.

Think back a few decades ago and recall the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was a man of peace, but his message brought to the surface the hatred of some whites for the blacks and some blacks for the whites.

As he preached nonviolent resistance to the oppressive policies of his day, blacks were lynched, little black girls died in their church in Birmingham at the hands of white men who later bragged about setting off the explosives. Nearly four decades later, some of them were convicted of their crime.

Many of those whites who marched with Dr. King in those days found ridicule and ostracism among their peers. Many of them were shunned by their friends and by their families. White members of the clergy who spoke from their pulpits for equal rights for the Negroes lost their pulpits.

Do we want the ole time religion we sing about?

The ole time religion of Jesus' disciples was costly. We don't want that kind of religion, do we? We don't want a costly religion, do we?

Jesus did not come to bring violence. But his message separated people. In that sense, his message was like a sword.

In case you haven't noticed, everybody still does not agree about Jesus, and we often separate from one another based on our beliefs about Jesus.

Jesus was simply saying to his disciples, "When you side with me, you automatically have people who will take sides against you." Sometimes those people will be your own family.

Jesus said, "For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, a man's enemies will be the members of his household.' "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

During our trip to Liberia in 2007, I met with Liberian Pastor Varney Freeman. Varney accepted Christ as a 16-year-old under the teaching of Cliff and Betty Hobbs, SBC Missionaries in Grand Cape Mount County.

After becoming a Christian, life became very difficult for Varney. An uncle offered him a full scholarship to a University in Egypt on the condition that he renounce his Christian faith and return to the mosque. When he refused, he was expelled from his family home.

He went on to pastor a church in a predominately Muslim community. As far as I know, he's still separated from his family.

Would you choose Jesus over family?

In the days of the early church, separation among family over the person of Jesus happened often. Today, in many parts of the world, it's still the case.

Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf lived in the 1700s, rejected a promising career as a lawyer, and answered a call into the ministry. "At age nineteen, the young noble went on a tour of Europe and made a stop at an art gallery.

Zinzendorf saw a suffering Jesus wearing the crown of thorns as portrayed in the famous painting, *Ecce Homo*, by Domenico Feti. The inscription under the face of Jesus said, "All this I did for you: what are you doing for me?"

With this face to face encounter with Jesus and his suffering, Zinzendorf resolved that the life of nobility and luxury must give way to a life of service to God."

(From *Our Christian Heritage*, Doug Weaver, p. 198.)

In breaking the family tradition and the expectations of his family to become a lawyer, Zinzendorf demonstrated that he loved Jesus more.

That's ole time religion, but do want that kind of religion?

Who wants to have to choose Jesus over family? That's not even fair, is it?

Who wants to have to choose Jesus over friends? What kind of religion would ask you to give up friends to follow Jesus?

Ole time Christian religion is the kind of faith that asks people to give up their idea of a meaningful career to take on a ministry that involves a sacrificial life of serving Jesus.

Who wants that kind of life? What preacher would be foolish enough to ask people to give up anything to become his disciple?

Jesus.

Jesus is the kind of preacher that asks people to make those kinds of choices.

“Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me,” Jesus said. (Matthew 10:38 NIV).

Following Jesus involves making some sacrifices.

Ole time religion is not about singing hymns and the doxology, hearing the choir and a sermon in a traditional sanctuary at 11:00 on Sunday morning.

It is not about tradition at all unless you are referring to the tradition of sacrifice, obedience, non-wavering faith, grace-based acceptance, and evangelistic outreach.

Ole time religion is about taking up our cross daily and following Jesus where He leads us. Instead of looking at what you are giving up to follow Jesus, which is where Satan wants us to look, we ought to try looking at who Jesus is leading us to minister to, and the blessings we are gaining from doing the will of God.

Here’s what we gain, according to Jesus, “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” Matt 10:40-42 NIV

The ole time religion we need is a religion of sacrificial commitment to Jesus Christ that yields the peace of Christ and the blessings of Almighty God. Anything else is a modern-day religion of convenience that will fail to lead us to the promises of God.

If your faith seems empty this morning, the ole time religion that involves sacrifice, deep commitment, hard work, and a fearless attitude to follow Christ wherever he leads may be what you need.

Couple this with the ole time grace of Christ that's available to all who come to Christ confessing sins and willing to take up our cross and follow Christ, and you have more than a religion. You have the abundant, eternal life offered by Jesus.

Will you come to pray to receive that life today?

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