

Christianity Confused (Luke 9:46–62)

Christianity Explored

Matt Tyler, my friend and our church’s mission partner, is the Senior Pastor of Bangkok City Baptist Church in Thailand. Prior to this, he served as the Assistant Pastor of Shanghai International Bible Church before he and his family were forced out of China during the COVID pandemic. For years, both in Shanghai and in Bangkok, Matt has utilized an evangelistic course called *Christianity Explored*. *Christianity Explored* is a seven-week Bible study through the Gospel of Mark, developed more than twenty years ago by evangelical Anglicans Rico Tice and Barry Cooper at All Souls Church in London (where John Stott pastored for decades). The course is designed to be conducted in an informal setting (anywhere from a church classroom to a living room to a coffee shop), and is designed for those interested in discovering what Christianity is all about. Each session (they call them “conversations”) presents a core truth of the Christian faith, beginning with a brief video and followed by a Bible study and an opportunity to ask questions.

- Session One explores the question of who Jesus is, using Mark 1:1 (“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”) and 8:27–29 (Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ) as the foundational texts.
- Session Two examines Jesus’ power and authority over demons (1:21–27), disease (1:40–41), nature (4:35–41), and death (5:21–43).
- Session Three looks at sin and its consequences (2:1–12, 7:20–22, 12:1–9, 9:43–47).
- Session Four addresses the remedy for sin in the cross of Christ (15:1–41).
- Session Five explores the resurrection of Christ and what it means for His disciples both then and now (15:42–16:8).
- Session Six examines the topic of conversion, using the negative example of the rich young ruler (10:17–22) and the positive example of the children who came to Jesus (10:13–16).
- Session Seven returns to the question that Jesus posed to His disciples at Caesarea Philippi— “Who do you say that I am?” —and challenges participants to respond with Peter, “You are the Christ” (8:27–37; 10:28–30).¹

¹ <https://www.christianityexplored.us/courses/christianity-explored/>.

I have long wanted to host a *Christianity Explored* course at First Baptist Nixa; but if I am honest, I haven't done so because I am doubtful anyone would attend. Perhaps I am wrong; perhaps my skepticism reveals a lack of faith. But *Christianity Explored* was developed in London, where according to the most recent census, only 40.7% percent of the population identify as Christian (and less than 7% would identify as evangelical; some estimates go as low as 2%).² In other words, the overwhelming majority of the population of London do not identify as Christian and have no idea what the Christian faith is. In Bangkok, just over 1% of the population identify as Christian. People regularly visit BCBC who do not identify as Christian; perhaps they were invited by a friend, or perhaps they are simply intrigued by what goes on there. I assume the same is true at All Souls Church in London. Yet in Nixa, I would conservatively estimate that somewhere around 80% of our citizens identify as Christian (the national average is 62%, and I assume that Nixa is well above that average).³ Yet, on a given Sunday, I would estimate that no more than 20% of the population of Nixa attends church. I actually think the number is closer to 10%, but I'm feeling generous; the national average of those who claim to attend church regularly is 21%, but actual data suggests the number is more like 5%.⁴ And if we simply take regular church attendance as a metric of authentic Christianity (authentic Christianity is certainly more than this, but it is not less than this), while 80% of the population of Nixa (probably more) identify as Christian, only 10–20% (probably far less) actually are Christian. This gap of 60–70 percentage points presents one of the most significant hurdles to evangelism in our context. This factor is the primary reason I believe evangelism is more difficult in Nixa than in many places throughout the world; in fact, I contend it is more difficult here than in many places in the United States. Where else in the world is the vast majority of the mission field comprised of unconverted “Christians” who have no interest in exploring the Christian faith because they assume they are already *in* the Christian faith? Let me

² “Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>.

³ https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-landscape-study-religious-identity/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=23983542891&gbraid=0AAAAA-ddO9HlsEQuH6gVnnFIwvUQMsWt6&gclid=CjwKCAjwyabTBhBFEiwAM3mNUP8bZb1Xb3YPgpgZRmp58XfApLcnU15FYpdmAhdLXY3mU3D5wwtdhxoC1vYQAvD_BwE.

⁴ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups,” March 25, 2024; <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>; Paul Prather, “Why As Few as 5% of Americans Attend Church Each Week,” July 15, 2024; <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2024/7/9/data-analysis-shows-as-few-as-5-of-americans-attend-church-weekly>.

be clear... this does not excuse us from the responsibility to make disciples in our own context; in fact, creating a culture of evangelism will be one of the focal points of our church in the coming year. It is merely to suggest that hosting a course called *Christianity Explored* is probably not an effective evangelistic method in Nixa, Missouri, at least not until we have done the preparatory work of helping that 60–70% see that they are not actually Christians at all. But I would love to be proven wrong, and if you are here or watching online and would be interesting in taking such a course, I would be thrilled to lead you through it. Just let me know.

Christianity Confused

But while our context may not be ripe for a course like *Christianity Explored*, our context desperately needs a different course that might be called *Christianity Confused*. For our area is filled with confusion about what Christianity is, what it teaches, and what it demands of its adherents. In this morning's text, we find a number of interactions between Jesus and His disciples (or would-be disciples), each of which corrects a misunderstanding about what it means to follow Christ. I think Luke grouped these interactions together because they bear a common theme—each presents a distortion of discipleship, a confusion of Christianity. This morning we will walk through each of the next four paragraphs, observing how Jesus corrected each confusion and clarifies what is true discipleship. The thesis statement of this sermon is as follows: *We must allow Jesus to define discipleship; for left to our own wisdom, we will confuse Christianity to the detriment of ourselves, our church, and our witness in the world.*

I. Christianity Is Not a Meritocracy (9:46–48)

The first clarification Jesus provided to His disciples was that Christianity is not a meritocracy. This is the confusion addressed in vv. 46–48:

An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts,⁵ took a child and put him by his side and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.” (9:46–48)

⁵ We must not miss the subtle nod to Jesus' omniscience, for He knew “the reasoning of their hearts”; see Garland, 404.

This “argument” (διαλογισμὸς) reveals a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the Christian faith and of the kingdom of God. And because it is so fundamental, Jesus could not allow it to go unaddressed. In fact, this would not be the last time the disciples would have the exact same argument (cf. 22:24–27), demonstrating that this confusion is deeply ingrained in us and not easily rooted out. What confusion about the nature of the kingdom of God lay beneath this persistent squabble among the disciples? I see two areas of confusion.

First, the language of “greatest” is foreign to the kingdom of God, for the very language of “greatest” (μεῖζων) implies comparison. The disciples were not merely speaking of who was “great,” but of who among them was “greatest.” Already, then, they were in dangerous territory. As soon as we import into the kingdom of God the language of comparison, we import standards of comparison. And as soon as we import standards of comparison, we are no longer conceiving of the kingdom of God as a kingdom of grace, but rather as a kingdom of merit—a meritocracy. What possible standards of comparison did the disciples use in order to argue for their relative greatness? If we simply go back to the beginning of chapter nine, we find several potential points of comparison. They could have been arguing for their relative greatness on the basis of how many demons they had cast out or how many diseases they had healed. They could have been arguing for their relative greatness on the basis of the size of the crowds to whom they had preached, the number of converts they had won, or the number of people they had baptized. Peter could have argued for his greatness on the basis of his confession of Jesus as the Christ of God. Peter and James and John could have argued for their greatness on the basis of the fact that Jesus brought them up to the Mount of Transfiguration, and left the rest behind. There are always metrics available to evaluate where you rank in the kingdom of God, if you are so inclined. How pristine is your church attendance? How many mission trips have you gone on? How much do you tithe? How often do you serve? How consistent is your personal worship time? How many kids do you have (only two!?!)? How well behaved are they? How do you educate them (you send them to *public* school?!?!)? How clean is your past? Ever committed any of the “big sins?” (Or, sometimes the standard of greatness is how checkered is your past, and therefore how interesting is your testimony and how well do you understand grace?) How many books have you read? How reformed is your theology (you’ve never read Calvin?!?!)? How pristine is your Spotify playlist (no Hillsong on there, right?!?!)? We could go on... There is an endless list of accomplishments by which to evaluate ourselves and others, and to compare ourselves with

others. But as soon as we find such comparisons creep into our thoughts and invade our soul, as soon as we begin thinking or speaking in terms of “greater” or “greatest,” we ought to hear the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthian church, which was in the habit of ranking apostles from least to greatest:

What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Cor 4:7)

The kingdom of God is not a meritocracy. It is not a kingdom of merit; it is a kingdom of grace. In the kingdom of God, there is only one who is great, only one who can boast, and that is Christ.

I will not boast in anything—no gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ—His death and resurrection.

In a meritocracy, those who contribute the most receive the greatest honor. In the kingdom of God, no one contributes anything that has not been given by grace, and therefore all glory and honor belong to Christ alone.

Second, value is not assigned according to what one can contribute, but according to what God has conferred. This seems to me to be the point of Jesus’ object lesson about receiving children. In the ancient world, children were not viewed as possessing intrinsic value, only potential value as daughters could be sold for a bride price and sons could add to the family honor and estate. Therefore, if a child did not possess potential value (i.e. was disabled in some way), it had no societal value and was often left to die of exposure.⁶ Sadly, even with its doctrine of the *imago Dei*, ancient Judaism was not much better. Edwards writes, “We are mistaken if we imagine that Greek and Jewish societies extolled the virtues of childhood as is generally true in modern Western society. Societies with high infant mortality rates and high demand for human labor are not sentimental about infants and youth.”⁷ The Jewish Mishnah records the words of Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas: “Morning sleep and midday wine and children’s talk and sitting in the

⁶ Garland, 404, citing Thomas E. J. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1989), 6–7.

⁷ Edwards, 290.

meetinghouses of ignorant people put a man out of the world” (*m. ’Abot. 3:11*). According to one tractate, girls under the age of twelve could be sold by their fathers into slavery (*m. Ket. 3:8*).⁸ So children *as children* had zero societal value; they were, rather, a societal drain that was merely tolerated in hopes of a future return. It is against this backdrop that Jesus “took a child and put him by his side and said to them, ‘Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great’” (vv. 47–48). What was Jesus teaching? What misconception was He correcting? The disciples (at that time) would never have done what Jesus did—that is, give a child their time and attention. Neither did they imagine Jesus would do such a thing. You will recall that they rebuked those people who brought their children to Jesus for Him to bless them (18:15–17). Why? What lay behind their disregard for children? I think it is the fact that children had nothing to offer them in return. Children had no value in their eyes because they contributed no value. The disciples received no increased social standing for doing children’s ministry; in fact, people would probably think they were foolish. The children had no money, no power, no prestige; they had no social currency with which to buy the disciples’ time and attention. But Jesus is teaching them that in the kingdom of God ministry is not performed, service is not rendered, in hopes of gaining some social or material currency. In the kingdom of God, people are not valuable because of what value they can contribute; they are valuable because God values them. This is why Jesus says that if they receive a child in His name, they have received Him, and indeed, they have received the Father who sent Him. Thus, the one who is least in the kingdom (like that child) is great and deserving of our time and attention, our love and service.

Christianity is not a meritocracy. Christians are not great because of what they do, for all is of grace in the kingdom of God. People are not valuable and deserving of our time and attention because of what they can potentially contribute. People are valuable because God had conferred value upon them; and God confers value differently than man does, for He is absolutely independent and self-existent and needs nothing from man. What is the application of this first lesson? Let me suggest three:

- There is no place for boasting in the church. Words like “greater” and “greatest” have no place in the kingdom of God, unless we are speaking of Christ, who alone is great,

⁸ Cited in Edwards, 290n95.

greater, and greatest. What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not receive it?

- There is no place for favoritism in the church. People are valuable and deserving of our time and attention, without consideration of what they can do for us. People are valuable because and to the degree to which God values them. James wrote:

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? (Jas 2:1–5)

Why would these church members give the preferred seat to the rich man instead of the poor man? Because the rich man can contribute something in return. James said, "Christians don't accord value that way. In the kingdom of God, God establishes value; and He has chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." The church is not a meritocracy; it is a theocracy, and the currency of the kingdom is established by the King.

- There is a place for children in the church. Children are valuable, because God values them; therefore, they are to be valued in the church. We must give much time and attention to ministering to them, and no adult in this church should think of children's ministry as somehow beneath him. Now, I think we need to resist swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction. Children are not to be the center of the church (nor of the home, for that matter). We should not make ministry decisions on the basis of what children want or don't want, what they like or don't like. Children are valuable... but children are also foolish, and do not know what they need. Therefore, churches and parents are foolish if they look to their children for direction. Children are born thinking they are the center of the universe; we should not foster this

delusion. But there is a biblical middle ground wherein children are treasured and taught, and they are expected to respect and obey. May it be so at First Baptist Nixa.

II. Christianity Is Not a Monopoly (9:49–50)

The second clarification Jesus provided to His disciples was that Christianity is not a monopoly. This is the confusion addressed in vv. 49–50:

John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.” (9:49–50)

If you are scratching your head and saying, “I thought it was the other way around; I thought Jesus said, whoever is not with us is against us?” This is because Jesus says precisely that in Luke 11:23,

“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” (11:23)

The first sounds broad and generous, the second narrow and strict. So which is it? The solution lies in the different pronouns, different audiences, and different contexts of each saying:

- In Luke 9:50, Jesus says, “The one who is not against *you* is for *you*.” In Luke 11:23, Jesus says, “Whoever is not with *me* is against *me*.” The question in the first instance is, who belongs to the band of disciples? The question in the second instance is, who belongs to Christ?
- In Luke 9:50, Jesus was speaking to His disciples about another disciple. In Luke 11:23, Jesus was speaking to the Pharisees about themselves.
- In Luke 9:50, the context is about ministry in the name of Christ. In Luke 11:23, the context is about the identity of Christ and whether He casts out demons by the power of Satan.

When it comes to the question of who belongs to the kingdom of God, if you are not with Christ in repentance and faith, you are not in the kingdom of God but are joined in rebellion against His

kingdom (11:23). But when it comes to the question of who can minister in Christ's name, if they name the name of Christ and minister in the name of Christ, don't hinder them.⁹ Who this unnamed exorcist was, we are not told. Most likely, he is someone who had experienced Jesus' ministry, or perhaps the ministry of the disciples, he had believed the gospel of the kingdom and had been baptized in the name of Christ, but he did not follow Jesus around Galilee as did the twelve and the larger company of disciples. Evidently, he just went home and began ministering in Christ's name. Whoever he was, John and the others did not know what to do with him.

What confusion lies behind the actions of John and the disciples in attempting to stop this man from casting out demons in Jesus' name? It is the misconception of thinking that we have the monopoly on ministry that God chooses to bless. We live in a day of unprecedented division within the global church. This is both a good thing and a bad thing. It is a good thing in that, often such division has resulted from churches breaking away from other churches in an attempt to be more faithful in their doctrine and practice. I think this is a good thing, provided such division was due to primary issues; or if it was over secondary or tertiary issues, provided such churches continue to treat those they left behind charitably. Faithfulness is in short supply in our age, and unity should never be maintained at the expense of truth properly triaged. So I count it a good thing when a Baptist church maintains its Baptist convictions, even if that means a Presbyterian cannot join. And I count it a good thing when a Presbyterian church maintains its Presbyterian convictions, even if that means a Baptist cannot join. I rejoice that both churches are remaining faithful to their doctrinal convictions.

Where this division becomes problematic is when the Baptist church and the Presbyterian church begin to criticize one another's ministry, or in some way hinder that ministry. It becomes problematic when the Baptist begins to think that God would not bless the Presbyterian church because of their errant view of baptism, and therefore the members of that church probably aren't saved; or vice-versa. We could make the same application to Methodist churches, Assembly of God churches, and others. Is it possible that God would choose to genuinely convert someone in a Methodist church? Yes. Does that mean we must adopt their Arminian doctrine and evangelistic

⁹ "Here in v. 50 the issue is the relationship of disciples *among themselves*; in 11:23 the issue is the relationship of disciples *with Jesus*. There can be no neutrality with regard to the person of Jesus (so 11:23), but disciples must learn tolerance with those who differ from them (so 9:50). The interplay between Jesus and the disciples in 9:1–50 argues for exactness in the church's Christology and broadness in its ecclesiology"; Edwards, 292.

practices or join with them in some institutional sense? No. Is it possible that God would choose to genuinely heal someone in an Assembly of God church? Yes. Does that mean that we must affirm their Pentecostal doctrine and start joining them in their healing crusades? No. Jesus neither affirmed nor disclaimed this unnamed exorcist's doctrine or practice. He simply said that the man was on the same side as the disciples.

First Baptist Nixa does not have a monopoly on true doctrine or pure practice. We are as faithful as we know to be, and we are *semper reformanda*—always reforming according to the Word, but we are not the only church that God owns and blesses. While we strive to be faithful, let us also strive to be humble and charitable towards those who name the name of Christ and minister in the name of Christ, from different churches and denominations. Before I move on, let me read you a quote from J. C. Ryle, the great evangelical Anglican of 19th-century Liverpool:

Thousands, in every period of church history, have spent their lives in copying John's mistake. They have laboured to stop every man who will not work for Christ in their way, from working for Christ at all. They have imagined, in their petty self-conceit, that no man can be a soldier of Christ, unless he wears their uniform, and fights in their regiment. They have been ready to say of every Christian who does not see everything with their eyes, "Forbid him! Forbid him! for he followeth not with us."

The solemn remark of our Lord Jesus Christ, on this occasion, demands our special notice. He pronounces no opinion upon the conduct of the man of whom John speaks. He neither praises nor blames him for following an independent course, and not working with his disciples. He simply declares that he must not be forbidden, and that those who work the same kind of work that we do, should not be regarded as enemies, but allies. . . .

The plain truth is, that we are all too ready to say, "We are the men, and wisdom shall die with us" (*Job* 12:2). We forget that no church on earth has an absolute monopoly on all wisdom, and that people may be right in the main, without agreeing with us. We must learn to be thankful if sin is opposed, and the gospel is preached, and the devil's kingdom pulled down, though the work may not be done exactly in the way we like. We must try to believe that men may be true-hearted followers of Jesus Christ, and yet for some wise reason may be kept back from seeing all things in religion just as we do.

Above all, we must praise God if souls are converted, and Christ is magnified, —no matter who the preacher may be, and to what church he may belong.¹⁰

So First Baptist Nixa, let us hold fast to our convictions, yet let us not act as though we have a monopoly on ministry that God owns and blesses. Let us be humble in regard to our own church, and charitable in regard to other churches. Let us speak well of other churches, and pray faithfully for their ministries. For, if they hold to the essential doctrine of Christ, are seeking to minister in the name of Christ, they are not against us; they are for us. We are not competitors; we are co-laborers.

III. Christianity Is Not National (9:51–56)

The third clarification Jesus provided to His disciples was that Christianity is not national. The kingdom of Christ is not of this world (Jn 18:36), and it must not enforce its doctrine or practice with secular power. This is the confusion addressed in vv. 51–56:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village. (9:51–56)

Although ten chapters remain before Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Luke records in v. 51 that Jesus’ Galilean ministry had concluded and that He was on His final journey to Jerusalem. The next ten chapters are largely unique to Luke’s Gospel, and contain mostly teachings that are probably not strictly chronological. The days had drawn near for Jesus “to be taken up” (ἀναλήψεως), a reference to His ascension.¹¹ But before His ascension to right hand of God, Jesus must first be crucified and raised, which is why He “set his face toward Jerusalem,” a

¹⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke, Volume I* (1858; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 251–52.

¹¹ Edwards, 296; Garland, 413. Morris writes that by using this word, Luke has in mind “the consummation of Jesus’ work in the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and session at God’s right hand (cf. 22:69)”; Morri, 198.

Hebrew metaphor for determination.¹² Jesus evidently selected a course through Samaria, and sent messengers ahead to make preparation and provision for His arrival. This was not Jesus' first sojourn through Samaria (Jn 4:4–42). The Samaritans were not unfamiliar with Jesus or His ministry. But in this instance, their hatred for the Jews (the feeling was mutual) got the better of them. The Samaritans rejected Jesus, Luke says, “because his face was set toward Jerusalem.”¹³ In response, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritan village, much as Elijah had called down fire to consume the soldiers of Ahaziah, king of Israel (2 Kgs 1:10, 12). You have to admire their faith, if not their zeal. They expressed no doubts whatsoever that God would answer their prayer. Perhaps they were a little drunk on the power they had wielded on their earlier mission (9:6). At any rate, Jesus rebuked them. Two textual variants, poorly attested and therefore unlikely to be original, add the words, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man came not to destroy people's lives but to save them.”¹⁴ At this, Jesus simply turned around and proceeded to another village.

What confusion lay behind James and John's offer to destroy the Samaritan village? It is the same confusion that afflicts a growing number of American evangelicals today who are clamoring for some form of Christian nationalism or official Christian establishment. James and John knew that Christ is the King. They knew that He had come to inaugurate the kingdom of God. They were right about that. But they assumed that Christ's kingdom would be aligned with the nation of Israel. They assumed that Jesus would establish His throne in Jerusalem. This is why they could not make heads or tails of His repeated predictions that “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (9:21; cf. 9:43–45; 18:31–34); both the crucifixion and the resurrection caught them totally off-guard. Why? Because these events did not align with their

¹² Edwards, 297–98; Garland, 413. Morris writes, “But first in this sequence [crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, session] is the cross, and there is courage accordingly in the fact that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem”; Morris, 198.

¹³ “It is not said who Jesus' messengers were, but probably they were some of the Twelve who went on ahead to prepare lodgings for the little band. A group of a dozen or so would strain the resources of a small village if they arrived unexpectedly; and, of course, there may have been more. We do not know how many ‘disciples’ were with him. But the Samaritan villagers, seeking that his face was set toward Jerusalem, would have nothing to do with Jesus. Their feud with the Jews was so bitter that they would not help anyone travel to Jerusalem, though apparently they did not mind receiving Galileans as such. Josephus tells us that Samaritans were not averse to ill-treating pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, even to the extent of murdering them on occasion (*Bellum* ii.232; *Antiquities* xx.118; this latter passage tells us that it was the custom of the Galileans to pass through Samaria at festival time)”; Morris, 198.

¹⁴ Edwards, 298n23; Garland, 415; Morris, 198.

presuppositions. Presuppositions are powerful things; they have incredible power to blind people to the truth. That the disciples' expectation was that Jesus would inaugurate an earthly kingdom in Israel is clear from their question to Jesus just prior to His ascension:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:6–8)

Jesus then ascended to His heavenly throne (1:9). While the disciples stood watching, two angels appeared and spoke to them of Christ's second advent in heavenly glory (1:10–11).

So James and John were confused about the nature of Christ's kingdom during this present age. It is not an earthly kingdom. The gospel spreads during this age, not by building an earthly kingdom and enforcing faith through the power of the sword, but by preaching the gospel and planting churches. Jesus made this clear to Pilate when he asked Jesus whether He was the King of the Jews:

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not of this world." (Jn 18:36)

Because Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, His kingdom does not advance by the power of the sword. But the power of the sword is precisely what James and John wanted to wield against the Samaritans. To their thinking, the Samaritans had rejected the King, and so deserved to die. But Jesus would not permit them to punish the Samaritans for their unbelief and rejection; rather, such punishment is reserved for Christ's return and the day of judgment. [Not to mention that in Acts 8, Samaria was thoroughly and powerfully evangelized, to their great joy and Christ's great glory.] There is one institution, and one institution alone, that has authority to exercise judgment and execute that judgment with the power of the sword, and that is the state (Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pt 2:13–17). As Jesus would not allow James and John (the church) to execute judgment upon the

Samaritans, we may deduce that the church is not the state, must not be aligned with the state, and must not wield the sword of the state.¹⁵ While Christ's kingdom remains in heaven, the church has zero authority on earth to exercise the power of the state to either incentivize faith or to punish unbelief. Do not confuse church and state; they are and must be separate until the King returns.

To confuse church and state will only serve to confuse the gospel and weaken the church, as has been proven *every single time* it has been attempted over the past seventeen hundred years. The church was designed to exist as “strangers and exiles” throughout this present age (Heb 11:13); the church's power and strength comes from its distinctiveness from the world. But what will a so-called “Christian America” do by privileging adherence to Christ and punishing disobedience to Christ, by incentivizing faith and indicting unbelief, but confuse the gospel and weaken the church? Christian nationalism, even of the “soft establishment” variety, is a flawed idea, constructed upon a flawed eschatology, that can only result in flawed churches filled with fake Christians.¹⁶ Jesus did not call us to build a Christian nation (there is no such thing), but to be a Christian church.

IV. Christianity Is Not a Hobby (9:57–62)

The fourth clarification Jesus provided to His disciples was that Christianity is not a hobby. You cannot add Jesus to the periphery of life; Jesus takes precedence over all of life. This is the confusion addressed in vv. 57–62:

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus

¹⁵ “Jesus rejects any form of violent response from the church acting as the church. There will be a day of judgment, but that fiery verdict is for God to render. In the meantime, this is the day of salvation, when there is still time for people to repent—even people who have rejected Jesus Christ. Our present calling is not to seek revenge against God's enemies, but to serve them in love, asking God to temper the harsh edge of our zeal with the compassion of Christ”; Philip Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1: Luke 1–12*, REC (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 500–1.

¹⁶ On this point, see J. C. Ryle's comments; Ryle, 255–56.

said to him, “No one who puts his hand to plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (9:57–62)

Luke seems to have grouped these three interactions together because they demonstrate the demands of discipleship. Three would-be disciples of Jesus presented to Jesus their conditions of discipleship, and in each case, Jesus rejected their conditions. Discipleship is not a hobby; it is not something one does when the conditions are right. Discipleship is the unconditional following of Jesus wherever He leads.

First, following Christ takes precedence over our *comfort*. The first applicant approached Jesus and professed his willingness to follow Jesus anywhere. But Jesus knows the hearts of men, and he knew the heart of this man. He knew this was a declaration easily made, but difficult to keep (cf. Peter’s similar declaration in Lk 22:33).¹⁷ This man had not reckoned with the realities of discipleship; he was not ready to face the difficulties that attend following Christ. Jesus knew that when this man faced the reality of homelessness—or some other deprivation of comfort or security—he would not be willing or able to follow Christ. Philip Ryken comments, “Jesus never denied the more difficult aspects of discipleship, but always announced them in advance. He never presented the Christian life as a life of ease, but always as a life of sacrifice. His message was, ‘I love you and have a difficult plan for your life.’”¹⁸ Ryken is casting a sidelong glance at Campus Crusade’s *Four Spiritual Laws* tract, the first of which states, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” That is not the way Jesus presented the gospel of the kingdom.¹⁹ You cannot serve Christ and comfort. This distortion alone is responsible for much of the confusion over Christianity in our culture. The gospel calls you to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus. Jesus will divide you from your comfort until comfort is no longer your god and He alone is.

Second, following Christ takes precedence over our *culture*. Jesus approached the second applicant and commanded him to follow. This man consented, upon the condition that he first be

¹⁷ “This vow is easier made than kept”; Edwards, 299.

¹⁸ Ryken, 502.

¹⁹ “He would have no man enlisted under false pretences. He would have it distinctly understood that there is a battle to be fought, and a race to be run, —a work to be done, and many hard things to be endured, —if we propose to follow him. Salvation he is ready to bestow, without money and without price. Grace by the way, and glory in the end, shall be given to every sinner who comes to him. But he would not have us ignorant that we shall have deadly enemies, —the world, the flesh, and the devil, and that many will hate us, slander us, and persecute us, if we become his disciples. He does not wish to discourage us, but he does wish us to know the truth”; Ryle, 258–59.

permitted to go bury his father. Jesus' response was terse, and may appear somewhat insensitive and unkind. "Let the dead bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." The responsibility of family to attend to the burial of one of their own "was for all ancients, Jews and Greeks, a virtually inviolable duty," writes Edwards.²⁰ Another commentator states, "There is hardly one logion [saying] of Jesus which more sharply runs counter to law, piety, and custom than does . . . Lk 9:60."²¹ A number of commentators think that the man's father was not dead, but merely elderly. Ryken writes, "In those days Jewish people buried their dead within twenty-four hours, and family members sat with the body of the deceased until it was laid to rest. If the father had died already, his son would not have been talking with Jesus at all, but sitting at home with his family in mourning."²² In other words, the man in question was delaying his discipleship indefinitely.²³ That may be true, but it seems to me an attempt to make Jesus' demands less radical and more palatable. Besides, "Let me first bury my father" is a strange way to say, "Let me first care for my elderly father." At the very least, I think we can say the man's father, if not dead, was dying. To leave his father in this state would have been cultural suicide—no one in his family or in his village would have understood his actions or agreed with his rationale. They would have accused him of dishonoring his father. But the call of the King and the demands of discipleship will not wait for anything, especially not the consent of the culture. David Gooding writes, "If Jesus is God's Son, our first duty is towards him. A man who considers that he has a prior duty to fulfill before he is free to become a follower of Christ, has no concept of who Christ is."²⁴ Our culture will not scoff at your claim to be a Christian, unless following Christ causes you to do something crazy—like maintain strict standards of sexual purity until marriage, or refuse to watch sexually-explicit movies or shows, or lovingly and graciously refuse to indulge someone's transgender delusion, or refuse to sacrifice faithful church attendance on the altar of youth sports. *How do you expect your child to make the high school team if he doesn't play club ball?* How you expect your child to learn that Jesus takes preeminence over sports if your family never chooses Christ over sports?

²⁰ Edwards, 300.

²¹ Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, trans. J. Grieg (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 14; cited in Edwards, 301.

²² Ryken, 504.

²³ "This might have meant an indefinite delay and the affairs of the kingdom cannot be put off"; Morris, 199.

²⁴ David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 194; cited in Ryken, 505.

Third, following Christ takes precedence over our *clan*. A third applicant offers his discipleship, this time upon the condition of first saying farewell to his family. Seems a reasonable request, right? Wrong. The demands of Jesus are absolute and immediate. “One cannot call Jesus Lord, as this disciple-aspirant does, and then impose limits on his lordship,” writes Edwards.²⁵ Jesus says it’s now or never— “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”²⁶ Simply put, Christ comes before family. That is a hard truth in our “Focus on the Family” generation. Your wife, your husband, must not take precedence over Christ. Your children must not take precedence over Christ. Spouses and children are good gifts of God, and ordinarily and ideally there will be no conflict between loving your family and following Christ. But sometimes, there will be a conflict. And when that conflict arises, Christ must take preeminence. As I said earlier in regard to culture, so I say now in regard to family—if you never choose Christ over your family, how will your family ever learn that Christ is Lord of all? It is not loving to make your spouse, or your children, highest in your affections, for that is not where they belong. You love your spouse best, when you love Christ most. You love your children best, when you love Christ most.

Christianity Clarified

Beloved, we have a responsibility for the evangelism of Nixa. But how can we effectively evangelize a population that already believes itself to be Christians? We have to address the problem of counterfeit Christianity. And the only way to do that is to present a clear and consistent witness to the true thing, to the genuine article. We cannot expect Christianity to be clear in their mind if it is cloudy in ours. So let us learn from the Lord what is genuine discipleship in order that we might present a clear Christianity to our neighbors and the nations.

²⁵ Edwards, 301.

²⁶ For the background of this phrase in the story of Elijah and Elisha, see Ryken, 506. Ryken further writes, “When he talked about putting one’s hand to the plow, Jesus was saying that the ‘normal courtesies of family affection must give way to the overriding demands of the kingdom of God.’ The proverb he used to make this point came from the fields, where the best way to plow a straight furrow is to keep looking ahead at some fixed point in the distance”; Ryken, 506, quoting Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, TBST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979), 118.