**ARE CHRISTIANS READY FOR THE RETURN OF CHRIST? By Walter Guy**

 It is safe to say that Christians are eager for the return of Christ, but are they really ready for Him to come for them?

Ephesians 5:27 – *That He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.*

 Jesus is coming for a church that is prepared for Him; a church without spot or wrinkle, or any kind of blemish. It is quite clear that the church that exists today is very blemished, spotted and wrinkled; filled with all manner of false doctrines and traditions; tainted and spotted with the corruptions of the flesh, human selfishness and pride, which is the root cause of all sin.

Luke 18:8b *– Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”*

 Jesus, Himself, asked a question that would indicate that there could be something amiss in His people at the time of His coming. His concern was about our faith, or more accurately about our faithfulness and persistence in our confession and profession of who and what we really are representing by our obedience to Him; thus our “faithfulness” to Him as His true representatives on earth. Will He find us holding fast and firm to the end?

Will Christians be easily identified as His people who faithfully show His life through their own? This is the very area where Christians are lacking, they don’t look like Him; they don’t adequately represent Him. They are not the salt of the earth or the light of righteousness as Jesus said He called us to be.

Matthew 5:13-16 – *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

Most Christians have the idea that to be ready to meet Jesus at His return only requires one to know Him as their Savior and Lord. They fail to realize that once becoming a Christian through faith in Him that they are supposed to grow up into maturity in Him. They have a process to go through in order become like Him so that He can be seen in them as a positive identifier that they are indeed children of God through Christ. This is the purpose of the gift ministries that Jesus gave to mankind when He ascended – to mature believers so that are recognized as His.

Ephesians 4:10-12 – *He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,*

Unfortunately, the institutionalized church of today has long since done away with the essential ministries that are required to properly bring the saints to full spiritual maturity. There is no longer a place in the modern church denomination for real and true prophets, teachers, apostles or evangelists. Nowadays all ministry function is up to the pastor or his designee. The one gift ministry of pastor is not equipped to do all that Jesus appointed to be done. As a result, Christians are being formed into the image of their respective church or denomination and not into the image of Christ. It takes all five gift ministries to accomplish the proper maturing process as Jesus gave commission.

Ephesians 4:13-16 – *till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect* (complete spiritual) *man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*

 With all five gift ministries functioning in concert the saints can be matured to the full stature of the image of Christ. This objective is lacking in the church today. This process is required so that Christians can be fully recognized as His people on earth. This was a great concern to the apostle Paul:

Galatians 4:19 – *My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you,*

 Let’s look at what is involved in this maturing process and to have Christ fully formed in us. IT all revolves around the term REPENTANCE, which means CHANGE; not just changing from a sinful life but changing our entire way of living to a godly and spiritual, Christ centered way of life. This is what baptism in water is all about; it’s called the baptism of repentance. It is called that because of the significance of its meaning and what it represents.

Luke 3:3 – *And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,*

Baptism in water represents a totally changed life as it shows dying to the old life, burying it and rising up into a the new life.

Romans 6:4 – *Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*

For a true born–again Christian, the first change we can see is that being born again changes our spirit, as it is our spirit that is reborn and made alive eternally, (John 3:5-8). We also know that at the resurrection our mortal bodies are changed to immortal bodies, (1 Corinthians 15:42-53). However, while living this life on earth it is our lifestyle or manner of living that must be changed. This is our responsibility, and it is the ministry of the apostle, prophet, teacher and evangelist that guides us in this sometimes difficult and laborious process. This process begins with the renewing of the mind which is our soul where resides our individual intellect, emotions, personality and attitudes that regulate our individual behavior.

Romans 12:1-2 – *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

We must be transformed from the world’s image which upholds the corrupt base human nature known as “the flesh” or the “old man”. This begins by dying to self, putting off those lusts of the flesh – selfishness and pride, which requires a deliberate and willful daily duty we each impose on ourselves.

Ephesians 4:21-24 *– if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.*

Daily exercise of self-discipline is required; laying down your own desires to follow after His righteous will and desire for you. This is produced by being a disciple of Jesus, (not a disciple of a church or a man), and a disciple is one under discipline (or tutoring of the Lord and His Word). This requires dying to self. (As Jesus said to His Father, “not my will, but thy will be done”.)

Luke 9:23 – *Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.*

 The renewed mind and changed way of thinking is then conformed to His way of thinking, acting and talking and produces a way of living; a new man.

Colossians 3:10 – *and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,*

 We must know the difference between the old man of the flesh and the new man of the spirit that is transformed into the image of Christ. The “old man” of the flesh is recognized by his works, by the fleshly, selfish way he lives and what he does:

Galatians 5:19-21 - *Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

The Spirit of God forms the image character and nature of God in us if we only get the selfish flesh out of the way. Then we begin to see His life in each person who grows to spiritual maturity.

Galatians 5:22-23 – *But the fruit of the Spirit is* ***love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*** *Against such there is no law.*

 It must be noted that the Fruit of the Spirit is the character and nature of God that indwells us by His Spirit. We simply have to get our own self out of the way by dying to self. Then all that He is in us can come forth and be seen; but we must get our flesh, our self, out of the way first.

Galatians 5:24-25 – *And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.*

 This fruit is what God is waiting to see in us; it is the appearance of this fruit that determines the time of the harvest. The harvest occurs when the fruit has formed and ripens – when it’s ready to be picked.

Revelation 14:15 – *And another angel came out of the temple, crying with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, “Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe*.

Jesus spoke specifically on producing this fruit as being essential in the life of a believer. It is actually what God is looking for because He is the master farmer.

John 15:1-8 – *“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.*

Man cannot produce this divine fruit on his own because it is not the works of man that is considered divine fruit. Only the life of the vine (Jesus) flowing out through the branches can produce this fruit. Thus it is spiritual fruit – the fruit of the spirit. This fruit is the life of Christ visibly seen that the Father is looking for – His character and nature in His people.

Colossians 1:27 – *To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

 Now we need to consider how Jesus described the process of growing fruit from seed. This fruit must be allowed to grow in you from the precious seed sown in your heart. The growth process is challenging and has obstacles.

Matthew 13:37-43 – *He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*

That seed is the Word sown in our hearts. The seed represents Jesus who is the Word that became flesh. Seed is cast on the ground and since life is in the seed, it sprouts and begins to grow, (John 12:24). Jesus spoke of this process in a parable:

Matthew 13:18-23 – *Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”*

What is looked for in the harvest is a yield of 100% of the likeness of Christ in us. However, a yield of 60% or even 30% is acceptable as at least some His fruit is produced in you from the seed sown.

 Spiritual growth to maturity requires watering, nurturing and cultivation, this is provided by the functioning of all five gift ministries providing the care and effort to produce the desired spiritual fruit. Obstacles to spiritual growth are the corruption of the weeds (tares) and ungodly influences that need to be weeded out of one’s life.

Galatians 5:16-17 – *I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.*

 The glory to be seen in us is His image, His likeness, His character, His nature – the Fruit of the Spirit. Note that the first fruit of the spirit is exactly what God requires of us – LOVE.

John 15:16-17 – *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another.*

This is the primary identity of God’s children, the Sons of God:

1 John 4:7-13 – *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.*

Then we will finally see the manifestation (revealing) of the Sons of God, the harvest that God the Father has been waiting for.

Romans 8:18-19 – *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.*

 It is time for Christians to wake up to righteousness, put off the selfish flesh and its lusts, and put on the likeness of Christ in character and nature. IT is also time to acknowledge our Lord’s gift ministers that He ordained to accomplish this task and allow them to operate to bring true spiritual maturity to Christians.

Romans 13:11-14 – *And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.*

 Then we are truly prepared for the return of Christ!