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Why Are Christians So Hypocritical?

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Oh,

the hypocrisy of those Christians—they talk so much about righteousness and like to appear so morally upright, but underneath that façade, they are liars and cheats. Christian leaders lead lives of extravagant luxury, milking the vulnerable of their meager resources under the guise of “giving to God.” Pastors preach about the sanctity of marriage and then run off with their secretaries, and some even abuse children. Isn’t the Church just full of hypocrites?

So how should we respond to this charge? Let me share three perspectives that I have found helpful as I have worked through this issue.

1. We Shouldn’t Be Surprised by Hypocrisy Among Christians

First, we shouldn’t be surprised when we encounter hypocrisy among Christians. In fact, hypocrisy is just what we would expect to find if the Christian message is true. Why do I say that?

The Bible declares that we have all turned away from God, and that moral rebellion has distorted everything about us—all our desires are disordered in one way or another. We do not love what we ought to love or hate what we ought to hate—and even when we do love the right things, we love them in the wrong way or to the wrong degree.

If hypocrisy means not living up to our own standards, then we are all hypocrites. The only way to avoid being a hypocrite is to have no standards at all. In a sense, our hypocrisy is the compliment that vice pays to virtue. It is the acknowledgment of what ought to be true of us even when we live in a way that betrays that truth.

So I am not surprised when I see hypocrisy among Christians, frankly, because I see hypocrisy in myself. Too often, what I know to be true does not correspond to what I put into practice, and that gap is hypocritical. Sin has affected us all.

2. We Should Be Offended by Hypocrisy Among Christians

But let me say very strongly, that though we may not be surprised by hypocrisy in the church, we should still be offended by it. We should be offended because it is wrong, and Jesus hates hypocrisy.

Jesus had a reputation as a friend of “sinners,” but He had nothing but disdain for hypocrites—especially the religiously self-righteous variety. In all of the Gospels there is nothing quite like the vehemence of His denunciations against them.



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Repeatedly, Jesus lashes out: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces,” He says. “You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Woe to you, blind guides! . . . You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matt 23:13-16, 33, NIV).

Hypocrisy should not surprise us, but it should offend us, for it offends Jesus. And the first thing we should say when someone complains about hypocrisy in the church is that we agree with them! Yes, there is hypocrisy, too much of it—and it is an abomination to Christ our Lord. But there’s one more perspective on this issue that we must consider . . .

3. When We See Hypocrisy in the Church, We Should Seek to Overcome It

Christianity has within itself the resources for its own self-critique and self-correction, for Christian hypocrisy has to answer to Jesus.

Through history we have seen this happen: in the Bible the prophets of the Old Testament, like Isaiah and Amos, rebuke the people of God for their false religion—full of ritual but without truth in practice. And the Lord continues to stir up reform movements within the church.

Reformers such as William Wilberforce who opposed the slave trade and Martin Luther King Jr. who opposed Jim Crow racism based their appeal on Christian principles. They called on Christians to practice what they preached and urged them to treat their fellow human beings with the dignity that the God of the Bible demands. This is the self-corrective found within the Christian faith. We stand under the critique of Christ our Lord. Thus the answer to religious hypocrisy is not to give up on God, but to take Him more seriously.

Hypocrisy in the Church: What to Do About It

We can lessen hypocrisy in the church when we realize that being a Christian involves more than having a profession of Jesus; it involves *Jesus’s* coming to live within us by His Spirit, changing us from the inside. When we come to trust Jesus Christ, we are forgiven, and God begins a process of transforming us into the image of Christ. But that is a process, and it can be a slow process. Christians are forgiven, but they are certainly not yet perfected. So the church is filled with immature and broken people who still have a long way to go emotionally, morally, and spiritually.

But supremely, the gospel should strike a blow to hypocrisy, for it gets at its very root. It forces us to humble ourselves daily and to recognize the truth about ourselves as forgiven sinners, in need of God’s grace and power to live in truth. There’s no place for putting on a mask and pretending we’re something that we’re not—for God knows us from the inside out.

A humble, repentant heart is the answer to hypocrisy. Will you allow God to root out the hypocrisy in your own life?