

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 9/16/2022

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Brian McClaren is an author, speaker, and theologian. He was formally an evangelical pastor. He moved away from the evangelical orientation of the church in order to advocate for a more loving, inclusive, and contemplative Christianity. He is a faculty member of the Center for Action and Contemplation, teaching ways to reconnect with the message for which JESUS lived and died—unconditional love.

McClaren tells the story of how a few years ago, he was talking to his twenty-something son about becoming involved in a congregation. His son said to him, “Dad, any church I join would not welcome my friends.” His comment showed both the fact that he had friends who reflected a multitude of lifestyles, orientations, and opinions, and that most churches proclaim a condemnation of some of those life positionings.

For younger generations, relationships matter. This matters when they think about the organizations with which they affiliate, including churches. They reflect that the messages of many churches that reject certain people in spite of their faith in GOD and JESUS is contrary to their personal priorities and views. Their spirituality tells them, if they believe in GOD, that GOD created and loves everyone. They are reluctant to become involved with churches that seem to deny GOD’S universal love for all people. Such attitudes and messages have and will turn increasing numbers of younger people away from the church and, more importantly, from the grace and love of GOD.

Paul writes in Romans 3:23-24, “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of GOD, and all are justified freely by HIS grace through the redemption that came by CHRIST JESUS.” Let me break that down some. All are sinful. (Probably no argument there.) All have failed to live the life that GOD desires for each of us—the glory of GOD. All are justified. To be justified is like being charged with a crime (in this case sin), but then the court finds you “not guilty.” This is not the same as being found innocent. It doesn’t mean that you aren’t guilty. It just means that your status in the eyes of the court is “not guilty.” This finding is a gift—grace—because of the redemption—being saved from sin—that comes through the life and death of JESUS CHRIST. Justified is how GOD sees everyone, so long as one condition is met.

This one condition is explained in Romans 3:22: “*This righteousness is given through faith in JESUS CHRIST to all who believe.*” Righteousness also has that same meaning as “justification,” we are found not guilty. But it happens for one reason only—because of faith in JESUS CHRIST. Martin Luther always added the word “alone” after faith to help make it clearer. Our relationship with GOD is made right because of faith alone.

The church for centuries has put conditions on inclusion based on behaviors, and status, and so on. In doing so, it has created barriers to GOD. This, in turn, has pushed people away from the church. Yet, JESUS’ life was lived to show that GOD loves everyone and wants a relationship with everyone. That relationship is called faith. When Martin Luther studied Romans, he found this powerful message that we are justified by grace through faith alone. If we want to encourage young people to become a part of our faith communities (and we should because that's what GOD wants), we have to make it very clear that all are welcome. Only one thing matters: do you believe in JESUS? If so, you are welcome,

and even if you don't, we want you here so that we can help that faith develop. Only one thing matters: faith alone!

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey