

It's Good to Do Both

By Patrick Swayne

Some time ago I saw an article in an airline magazine highlighting the religious beliefs and practices of the natives of Tana Toraja, Sulawesi, Indonesia. Life in Tana Toraja is guided by an ancient animist religion. Some of the more notable features of the religion are: a caste system that divides and stratifies the village, ancestor worship, animal sacrifices to departed ancestors as well as to the earth, and, interestingly, a yearly practice of bringing dead bodies out of their tombs, washing them, and dressing them up as though they were alive.

However, what was most interesting to me about the article was the fact that Tana Toraja is considered a “Christian” community. After describing “twenty first century Toraja” as “overwhelmingly Christian,” the author mentioned how “the skulls of sacrificed buffalo rest[ed] below golden ‘Merry Christmas’ bunting” in one of the homes in which he stayed during his visit. What struck me most was how the article ended: “I ask Pasapan how these animist practices mesh with his Christian beliefs. ‘Well,’ he says philosophically, ‘nobody knows what happens after death. It’s good to do both.’”

Obviously, the “version” of Christianity that has made its way to Tana Toraja is not the one that is found in the pages of the Bible. Most of you reading this could easily identify what is wrong in the above paragraphs with these natives’ faith and would know the corresponding truth from God’s word (and if you don’t, please talk to me!). However, the real food for thought for Christians serious about restoring the New Testament church today is this – how many people are brought into the Lord’s church as supposed “converts” who really have only reckoned, “Well, it’s good to do both”?

I was once teaching a non-Christian visitor alongside another brother. The brother was taking the lead in the Bible study; it was the first opportunity I, the brother, or anyone from church for that matter had to study with this person. To be honest though, calling it a Bible study is really a stretch. The woman we were studying with had houseguests at the time of our study, and even though she honored the study appointment, she kept getting up to tend to her guests and as a consequence losing her train of thought.

In spite of the way the study was going, the brother I was working with suddenly said, “Would you like to be baptized today?” The woman responded by saying, “I don’t care to be baptized,” which sounds negative but is actually a southern American way of saying, “Sure, why not?” As the two of them got up, I said, “Hang on for just a moment, can you tell me why you would like to be baptized?” The woman could not and was rather confused that I was asking. Before long the woman’s husband came in and started talking about how he knew he was

saved because he felt “a jolt of lightning” going through his body. Any desire on the woman’s part to be baptized was gone, and we left. The brother said, “I think we missed our chance.”

What the brother I was working with did not realize is that the woman we were studying with had probably been baptized before and possibly more than once. At the very least, her understanding of baptism, like many in her particular denomination, seemed to be that it was necessary for church membership but not necessary as a step in putting on Christ (Galatians 3:27). As such, her previous baptism(s) (if any) and the baptism she was willing to submit to that day were not/ would not have been valid as they were not / would not have been done in faith (Colossians 2:11-12). If a person is baptized without faith, he is baptized like those in Ephesus (Acts 19:1- 5), not those on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38-41), and needs to be re-baptized properly (Acts 19:5). This woman probably thought the brother was asking, “Would you like to be a member of our church?” when he asked her to be baptized. She was happy to be one. However, she was not really happy to give up her previous understanding of the Bible and her faith. In effect, she was saying, “It’s good to do both.”

One cannot simply “do both” and be pleasing to God. Jesus spoke of the danger of putting a new patch on an old garment and putting new wine into old wineskins (Matthew 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-39). The end product in both the cases is loss – the loss of the garment as the tear gets worse or the loss of the wine as the bottle bursts. The faith of Jesus is something that must be held with two hands – if one tries to hold it along with something else, one or the other will soon be dropped (Luke 16:13).

So what we can do to make sure people are not just “doing both”? First, I would suggest we take our time. I know there is urgency in preaching and teaching – souls outside of Christ are lost and if they remain that way then they will spend eternity apart from God. However, the lost people that we encounter from day to day are only very rarely like the souls on the day of Pentecost. Many of those souls had heard three and a half years of Jesus’ teaching plus John the baptizer’s teaching before it; if they hadn’t, they had been studying the Old Testament Scriptures for most of their lives. They were trained to look for Christ. In contrast, many people that we meet today either don’t have this kind of a background or already think they’ve found Christ.

Second, I would suggest that we include in our studies with those who have not obeyed the gospel an exercise I call “counting the cost.” The thought is not new to me – Jesus encouraged those who were thinking about following Him to do just that before beginning to follow (Luke 14:25-35). Christ doesn’t want His disciples to start unless they intend to finish. To follow Jesus’ example, we should tell prospective converts that they will have to give up some things in order to follow

Jesus. It would then be wise to outline some examples of what might be included: their previous religious understandings/practices, their family ties (if their family is antagonistic to their new faith), their job (if it interferes with their faith), and of course sin. We should also help them to understand what they must take onboard – faithful attendance to church assemblies as well as sacrificial giving of their time, talent, and resources to the Lord’s church. People don’t have to understand everything to obey the gospel, but they should know enough to make an informed choice.

Third, I believe we should try to get someone who wants to be baptized to explain why they want to do so in their own words – and, instead of getting carried away with excitement, we should actually listen to what they say. When young children of church members come to be baptized, preachers will often try to talk them out of it. The reasoning is as follows: if a child can be talked out of being baptized, they’re not ready to be baptized. I don’t know why this reasoning is not applied to older people, because it is just as true for them.

Another thing to look for is a sense of urgency on their part (not ours). Occasionally, Chantelle will show me where someone has posted on Facebook, “There will be a baptism at church tomorrow!” Both of us sigh rather than smile at such a post, because we know that those in the Bible who understood baptism and wanted to obey Christ did so “the same hour [...] straightway” (Acts 16:33). If a person can delay being baptized, he does not really understand how important it is and may not understand it at all. Remember, Jesus actually tried to talk people out of following Him to ensure their understanding was complete and desire was genuine (Luke 9:56-62).

Religiously, it is not good “to do both.” Becoming a Christian involves a rejecting of the old man and a putting on of the new man (Ephesians 4:22-24). Let each of us examine ourselves to ensure we have truly rejected our old life and truly put on Christ. Further, let each of us “take heed how” we build on the foundation of Christ by teaching others the gospel; let each of us do our part to ensure people “obey from the heart that form of doctrine,” found in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 3:10; Romans 6:17).