



## More Than Bumper Stickers

Dt 11:18-28; Ps 46; Mt. 7:21-29; Rm 1:16-17; 3:22b-31

Seen any good bumper stickers lately? Bumper stickers tell us something about what their users think is important. I've seen several of interest lately: "Visualize using your turn signal." "Be Alert; The World Needs More Lerts." "God still wants spiritual fruit, not religious nuts." "Heading in the wrong direction? God allows U-turns." "When Jesus said, 'Love your enemies,' he didn't mean kill them." "Separate church and hate." "I like your Jesus. It's Christians I can't stand." "Are you as close to Jesus as you are to my bumper?" "Jesus is God with skin on." "Jesus is Lord."

Paul begins Romans speaking of faith as something he was willing to proclaim as blatantly as we might use bumper stickers. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God..." He did not follow that with a trite, pithy expression to slap on the back of an ox cart or chariot, however. He went on to describe in detail how the grace of God in Christ Jesus made a real difference in our coming to God with confidence and repentance. Like we do with Jesus' words, we want to choose a select part of his proclamation of faith and ignore the rest.

Liberals have been accused of doing just that in bumper sticker doctrinal practice. We have selected at times those elements of the gospel which sound and feel good as it relates to helping others. We emphasize Jesus' love for the sinner, care for the poor, and desire to help the sick. We worry with education, housing, and other social elements of the gospel, and just never quite get around with some of the more unpleasant aspects of the gospel: Hell is a reality. If one does not choose a relationship with God, one is choosing to live without God for all of eternity.

Conservatives, on the other hand, have been accused of just the same with their own bumper sticker doctrine. We have reduced the gospel to a pet series of phrases, rituals, and ceremonies which elevate certain aspects of sound Biblical doctrine over others. We have so worried ourselves with holding to right doctrine, that we have at times ignored Jesus' command to love our enemies and join in unity with other believers, even those with whom we disagree. After that, the lines get blurred. We all pick and choose those parts we want to emphasize. We pick up our selection of bumper stickers and drive off into the world, leaving others parts of the gospel behind at the store.

It is just easier and simpler to reduce the demands of faith and discipleship to catchy phrases we can affix to our bumpers. You have probably noticed that I don't have any bumper stickers on my cars. It's not that there are no bumper stickers out there I like. It's more that I am concerned about the rest of the message that does not fit on my bumper. Karen received in the mail a changeable bumper sticker. You can slide one into a plastic holder, then replace it at will with another. She really likes one of the inserts that asks, "How many wrong turns must a man take before he asks for directions?"

The closest to a bumper sticker slogan the early church used was, "Jesus is Lord!" It's one of the phrases we like to use today. I somehow don't think it carries the same weight it used to, however. The early church took a risk that their allegiance to Christ might cause them to be tried for treason against Rome. Some of us use the phrase about as glibly as others use bumper stickers.

In Jesus' day, they did not use bumper stickers. That does not mean that folks did not struggle with the temptation to reduce faith to a trite slogan, a staid ritual, or an empty stake on truth. Lip service

to God has been around since the beginning of humanity. It seems the prophets were constantly calling the people back to a real faith and dependence upon God, not just claiming an allegiance with no basis in reality. For too many, faith was simply the clothing they wore, the music they sang, the rituals of life in which they participated. It had nothing to do with serving God in sincerity.

Jewish life was filled with reminders of God, just as the bumpers of our cars or our T-shirts remind us of the existence of Christ Jesus. The Jews used phylacteries and mezuzahs. Following the text in Deuteronomy literally, they would hand tiny scrolls with proclamations of *Yahweh* as the only God and Lord. They would fasten the same to the doorposts of their homes, touching them upon entry and exit as tangible reminders of their allegiance to God. It did not always keep them honest in serving God, however. Even with these public proclamations of faith, there was often something missing to make such proclamations real. Are our bumper stickers any more significant?

Jesus saw many around him wearing their phylacteries and touching the mezuzahs on the doors of their homes. He watched crowds follow him as he taught, healed, and performed other miracles. Then he said, “No every one who calls me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter God’s reign.” To some, he said he would claim never to have known them, regardless of how many mezuzahs, phylacteries, or bumper stickers had been part of their daily living. Faith and salvation are more than trite sayings, religious quips, and bold statements affirming one’s faith. Faith in Christ requires relationship, commitment, and something more than lip service to Jesus as Lord.

Phylacteries were reminders, but reminders of the need for commitment. There was a daily choice to make about actually serving God, rather than personal whims. It is one thing to claim that God is our refuge and strength. It is one thing to claim service and submission to God. It is another thing entirely to live according to that declaration of committed faith.

We have this little problem called sin. In essence it is our innate drive to live for self at the expense of submitting self to the will of God. We want to be our own lords. We want to control our lives, make our decisions, and direct our own steps. We want somehow to reduce the complexity of faith such that we might be our own masters and still claim Christ as Lord. Paul says we must still reckon with our sin. We must still lay aside our sense of self-mastery in order to receive this gift of grace from God. The gospel for which we should have no shame must be so much more than another religious quip.

The gospel requires stating our allegiance. It also requires living that same allegiance and submission to Christ Jesus as Lord. It is not through deeds of righteousness that we inherit eternal life, but living the purposes of the gospel is the consequence of real faith. It is in our works and commitment that the reality of our proclamation of faith becomes real.

We are not saved from hell so much as saved for heaven—living in the immediate presence of God. The gospel is not about a God who reluctantly saves. Neither is the gospel of a God so desperate as to overlook our rejecting a real commitment to Christ as Lord. God will not force heaven on us, when we have refused to do any more than claim a commitment that is not real.

Real faith is a lot more than a bumper sticker. Anyone can slap a piece of paper on a car. Accepting Christ Jesus as Lord requires a whole lot more. Will we be among those who have done nothing more than pretend at faith? Put a bumper sticker on your car, but give it meaning as you live.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*