



Instant Christianity!

~ Philippians 3:12-14

"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Have we taken the "struggle" out of Christianity? Have we been able to get rid of the "straining forward" and the "pressing onward?" Have we unconsciously changed the parameters that have, in other ages, defined and governed Christian life and traded them for something that requires less "fuss?"

Wouldn't it be something if the church could manufacture a Christianity for busy people, a Christianity that requires little. It would be just the ticket for people who live in the "instant age."

To answer the question we must say, to some extent, we have and it has sold extremely well. The difficulty is that, now that *instant Christianity* has been on the market for some time, people are beginning to complain about a defective product --one that has failed to meet their expectations.

What would you think if all the hospitals were to closed down all of their departments ...except maternity? You could go to the emergency room with a heart attack or a broken leg; yet, not be received unless you were having a baby or were being born.

Birth is only the beginning of life; after that there is an entire lifetime of living and growing. During that lifetime, people hardly ever look back to their birth; the simple fact that they are alive proves that they were born.

With these thoughts as background, I will say, "It is no small wonder that the country that gave the world instant tea, instant coffee, instant potatoes, and T.V. dinners, would go on to give the world *instant Christianity*."

It was the American church that gave instant Christianity to the world. Instant Christianity was the child of American genius and the machine age. Machines were required for two reasons: *First*, people wanted to get important work done more quickly and easily than it could be done by hand. *Second*, people wanted to get the work "over with" so they could give their time to pursuits more to their liking, like loafing and playing. J. Oswald Sanders said, "We have turned it around, so that the chief end of God is to gratify man," rather than, "the chief end of man is to glorify God."

Instant Christianity serves a similar purpose in religion. It disposes of the past, guarantees the future, and sets the Christian free to follow any track he or she pleases in all good conscience and with a minimum of struggle and self-discipline. This is quite different from the experience of the Apostle Paul, who late in his ministry said he *still* had to will his body into subjection that he might do the things that were pleasing to God. There is no "quick and easy" there.

By *instant Christianity*, I mean the kind which is born of the notion that we may discharge our total obligation to God and to our souls by *one act of faith*, or at most two, and thereafter be relieved of all anxiety about our spiritual condition. It is as though we have, by one act, discharged our total obligation toward our souls and ought to infer from this that there is no reason to "seek to be Saints by character." An automatic, once-for-all quality is supposed here that is completely out of touch with the faith of the New Testament.

It is true that conversion to Christ may be, and often is, sudden. Where the burden of sin has been heavy, the sense of forgiveness is usually clear, crisp, and joyful! The more we understand our own human nature, its failure, and its short-comings, the more we appreciate the grace of God and the sharper is our conversion.

We have met God; we know we have eternal life, and we are likely to know when we received it. The renewed heart has little difficulty identifying the presence of God's Holy Spirit as he floods over our soul.

However, the trouble is, we tend to think of making Christians in the same way as stamping out washbasins, and we consequently misread the New Testament. We are constantly exhorted to make the decision, settle the matter, get the *whole thing* taken care of *at once* --and those who exhort us are right in doing so --they are right. There are decisions that can and should be made once and for all. There are personal matters that can be settled instantly by a determined *act of faith and will* in response to the words of the Bible. No one would want to deny this.

The question before us is, "Exactly what is accomplished by that one act of faith, and how much remains to be done?" How far does a single decision take us? Is that as far as we are going to go? Is that as holy as we are going to become? Is God finished with the product when we are born --or in this case when we are "born again?" I hope not. The church of Jesus Christ is not just babies --or, is it?

Instant Christianity tends to make the "faith act" terminal, thus smothering the desire for spiritual advance. It fails to account for and understand the true nature of the Christian life, which is not static, but expanding, progressive and building. We are to become day by day, and year by year more spiritual, more mature, more like Christ who gave us birth in the beginning. It is not enough to be born.

The instant variety overlooks the fact that a new Christian is a living organism and, as certainly as a new baby, must have nourishment, exercise, responsibility, hardship, suffering, and triumphs to assure normal growth.

Instant Christianity does not consider that the act of faith in Christ sets up a personal relationship between two *intelligent, moral beings* --man and God. No single encounter between God and man can ever be sufficient to establish the kind of relationship and friendship that God intends --it must be on-going.

By trying to pack all of salvation into one experience or two, the advocates of instant Christianity ignore the law of development which runs through all nature. They ignore the sanctifying effects of suffering, hardship, experience, failure, cross-carrying, and practical obedience --all clearly taught in the Bible.

They by-pass the need for spiritual training, the necessity of forming good religious habits, and the need to wrestle against the world, the devil and the flesh. All of these can have a strengthening, maturing effect on us, if we let them. Undue preoccupation with the initial act of believing has created in some, a psychology of contentment, as though they have graduated from the last school, and in others an attitude of "non-expectation" --there is nothing yet to come.

To many, it has imparted a mood of disappointment with the Christian faith. "Is this it," they say? "Is this all there is." No, this is only the beginning. There is a whole lifetime of living, serving, learning, growing, striving, falling, and getting up again; of being "workers together with God." --And, these are difficult days to "keep people together."

Yet, others are glad to accept the assurance of automatic blessedness. It relieves them of the need to watch, fight, and pray; it leaves them free to do what they want, so far as their Christian life is concerned.

Instant Christianity is a twentieth-century theology. We do not read of it in Wesley, Calvin, Luther or Whitfield. I wonder if the man who wrote these words would recognize it as the faith for which he finally died? "I don't mean to say I am perfect. I haven't learned all I should even yet, but I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ saved me for and wants me to be. No dear brothers and sisters, I am still not all I should be but I am bringing all my energies to bear on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God is calling us up to heaven because of what Christ Jesus did for us."

That is the message of Paul: I'm not perfect. I haven't learned everything. I'm still not all I should be. I continue to strain toward the goal. One thing about the Christian life is that there is always room for improvement! We are not as spiritual as we could be or should be.

Another thing about the Christian life is that, *We shall be!* The Christian life leads to a goal. "When He shall appear, then we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). Every Christian will reach that goal, but in the meantime, let's be about it. You cannot take the strain out of it, no matter what you do or say.

The "new birth" is not an invitation to get in a rocking chair, or to start a life-long vacation, so far as our soul is concerned. Birth is always an invitation to live, learn, grow, work, endure, suffer, survive, love, give, to do, to feel, and finally to arrive and to win!

So that, finally, we can say (but not yet), "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me in that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

In the meantime, let's "be at it" so far as our souls are concerned. Let's continue to "press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). Yes, the "high calling of God" is only accomplished by following Jesus Christ --"in Christ Jesus."

I know the instant variety has its appeal, but there is nothing like the good old-fashioned "home cooked Christianity." If I were you, I would save those recipes that came down to us from people who knew how to cook. Your hymn book is full of them. "Pass it on" goes both directions. Sure" Where did you get it? What do you really have to "pass on" –if you're going to throw everybody but you and your generation away? (2 Timothy 1:5).