

Natural or Supernatural Christianity

Romans 9:7

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

One of the things that put me off Christianity were the apparent exaggerations that people who said they were Christians made -- and in fact, the exaggerations that seemed to be made by people in the Bible. It just made me think, ah, the whole thing is a farce because they would quote promises like, "Do not be anxious for anything," "Look at the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they reap, and yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these", "So let your requests be made known unto God, and if God so clothes the lilies of the field and the grass, which now is and tomorrow is cast into the fire, will He not much more clothe you, Oh ye of little faith?" And then they would quote to me all kinds of instances where they had received gifts of money or gifts of clothes or gifts of food right at the time they needed it.

I regarded myself as a Christian -- and I did not experience any of those things. I ground away at my job and my finances. I knew where every dollar was going to and where every dollar was coming from. I had no experience of unexpected windfalls of any kind. I frankly began to feel, well, these people are just exaggerating. I suspect that there are some of you here this morning who feel that a little -- that you want to believe in God and you want to be real with him, but there are certain things that seem to you to be exaggerations. They are promises that you have never found fulfilled in your own life. So actually, we normally take one of two attitudes to this problem.

Many of us keep up the bluff. Many of us join in what we think is a great bluff for the sake of people that we respect or for the sake of people that we love. We know fine well that all the security that we have depends on our own good strong right arm and we know fine well that our money and our clothes come as a result of our own hard work -- but out of deference to people that we love and respect and because we feel that perhaps everybody strains the truth a little in this business of religion, we join the bluff and we attribute blindly to the Lord all kinds of events that we really in our own hearts feel are due to luck or coincidence or to our own hard work. That's one reaction.

The other reaction is that we simply do not believe the statement that Paul made in Romans 9:6. It's really the first half of the verse: "But it is not as though the Word of God had failed." And we just disagree with that. We say, "No, I'm not taking part in the bluff. As far as I'm concerned, the Word of God has failed in my life. I don't find these promises of God being fulfilled in my life, so as far as I'm concerned, the Word of God has failed and really I believe you're the answer to your own prayer, 'God helps those who help themselves', and this business of the promises of God being fulfilled in your life is just foolishness. It isn't true. It's exaggeration that people indulge in, in order to build God up, but it's not what I have found to be true."

Now, could I make this suggestion to you -- maybe God is not wrong. Maybe you're wrong. Maybe God does still keep his promises, but you're not the kind of person to whom these promises were made. Maybe you are Christians in name only. Maybe you aren't real children of God and that's why his promises are not being made real in your life.

Now, you may say, "Look, you have no right to destroy the little faith that I have." But if your little faith is as pretentious and hypocritical and bluff as that one I described in myself years

ago, it can hardly be called faith fulfilled in my life, and you're better without that than with it. So, I'm making the suggestion to you, perhaps you, as I found was my situation, you do not find God's promises fulfilled in your life because you're not really a child of God. You're a creature like all of us in the world, you've been made by God, but you aren't a real child of God. You aren't born of the Spirit. You aren't one of the people to whom he made the promises.

Now you remember, that's what we discovered last Sunday was the case with the Israelites. Paul said that God promised the Israelites a homeland. He promised that they would have prosperity for their children. He promised that his own son would lead them -- and here they are, under the heel of the Roman Empire, with their children paying taxes, to an occupying military power and far from being led by his Son, they have just crucified his Son. And then Paul says, "Is it that the Word of God has failed?" Then, you remember his answer, "No. It isn't that. It's that God did not make his promises to all who call themselves Israelites, but only to those who are really Israelites in their hearts. And there are many who are Israelites in name only. And to them God has made no promises, and therefore, his promises have not failed." And I'd just remind those of you who try to interpret prophecy about the Jews to remember that distinction that Paul makes, that not everybody who is called an Israelite is an Israelite. Now, in what way are they Israelites in name only?

It's interesting. It ties up with Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin this morning. If you notice Sadat referred to their common grandfather. I'd ask you to look with me, first of all, at the promise that was originally made to the grandfather of the Israelites, who is also by the way, the grandfather of the Egyptians and the Arabs, and that's Abraham. Will you look at Genesis 12:1? This was the original promise that God made of a homeland and prosperity and a great increase in children and in population.

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless him who blesses you, and him who curses you I will curse, and through you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.'" That's the promise God made to Abraham. But Abraham was in his eighties, Sarah was almost as old, and they got impatient. And here's what took place in Genesis 16:1, "Now Sarah, Abraham's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. And Sarah said to Abraham, 'Behold, now the Lord has prevented me from having children, go into my maid. It may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abraham hearkened to the voice of Sarah. So after Abraham had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarah, Abraham's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abraham, her husband, as a wife. And he went into Hagar and she conceived, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress."

And so Abraham remembered the promise that God had given him, that he'd have children as the sand upon the seashore, but he got impatient because of his age, and he in fact took the whole business into his own hands, and he and Sarah agreed that he would go into the maid Hagar, and he had a child by Hagar, and that child was Ishmael, who is regarded by the Arabs as their father. And Ishmael, you would have thought would then have had the promises of God extended to him, but God refused to do that. He refused to extend the promise that he had made to Abraham and to his seed, to this Ishmael, who was a son who was born by man's own self-effort, not in fact by God's promise.

And that's what happened in Genesis 17:15, "And God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarah your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations. Kings of peoples

shall come from her.' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old, shall Sarah who is 90 years old bear a child?' And Abraham said to God, 'Oh, that Ishmael (the son that he had by Hagar) might live in thy sight.' God said, 'No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I've heard you. Behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly. He will be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation, but I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.'"

So God refused to extend his promises to the descendants of Abraham that came through Ishmael the son that had been born through his own self-effort and his own determination in a purely human, natural way, and God kept to his promise that he would extend his promises only to those sons of Abraham that came through Isaac, the miraculous, supernatural gift that God gave to Abraham and Sarah when they were a hundred and ninety years of age. That's why Paul says what he says in Romans 9:7, which is the verse we are studying today. So, why are some of the Israelites suffering? Because not all the Israelites are Israelites -- not all are descended through the supernatural, miraculous work of God. "And not all are Children of Abraham because they are his descendants, but through Isaac shall your descendants be named."

So, really the descendants of Abraham are divided into two great branches. There's the one branch through Ishmael that comes through natural birth and man's own self-effort and determination, and there is the branch that comes through Isaac, the miraculous gift that God gave to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. In other words, there are those who are naturally born of Abraham, and there are those who are supernaturally born of Abraham. It is only to the supernaturally born that God extends his promises.

Now, you see what God is saying to us this morning? There are here in this auditorium two kinds of children of God, or people who call themselves children of God. There are two kinds of Christians: there are those who are naturally born, and there are those who are supernaturally born by the Holy Spirit, who are the true children of God. And it is only to this branch that the promises of God are fulfilled. So if you are in this position this morning, it is good that religion is not a vague list of generalizations. It is good that it is such a down-to-earth, empirical, objective thing. If the promises of God are not being made real in your life, it is possible that you are only a naturally born person who is trying to treat yourself as a child of God. As a Christian, it is possible.

I would just ask you, don't be self-defensive. I'm trying to help. I'm not trying to hinder you. So don't get back there and say, "You are not going to prove that to me." Just be real and honest. I want to be real and honest myself. If the promises of God are not being made real in my life, and I frankly think they are a lot of exaggerations, then I would want to know why that is so. Sometimes I think it is because some of you are not supernaturally born of God.

I suspect the whole problem starts with John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." I think many of us have a misunderstanding of what believing on Jesus means. I think many of us interpret it in a purely, intellectual way. It is strange that those of us who do that so often deny that we are in any way intellectuals. But we interpret "believe" as primarily, if not exclusively, a head issue. That is, we say, "The big emphasis in the Bible seems to be believe, believe -- believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved, and everybody is emphasizing 'believe'. Well, I believe in Jesus -- that is, I

accept the concepts that they have of Jesus, that he is God's Son. I accept that he died for us. I accept that he'll come again to judge the living and the dead. I accept that God forgives our sins. I accept that there is life everlasting. I believe in the holy catholic church. I believe all the things Christians believe. I believe these things, so that means that I am born again."

I think a lot of us say that. We hear all these preachers saying, "only believe, only believe", and we say, "Well, I DO believe." And we mean we mentally accept the concepts that we are taught about Jesus and about God and about the Holy Spirit. Accept those concepts mentally into your mind -- give mental, and at times emotional, acquiescence to those truths, and then we say, 'We've done that. I believe. So here I am. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him...' All right, then Ernest O'Neill, believe in him, and so I believe so I won't perish -- so I must have everlasting life."

I think many of us call ourselves Christians who go through just that kind of experience. Now, our Christianity is primarily a mental exercise. We find ourselves for instance, preoccupied with believing. In fact, we often think if only I could believe a little more, my life would be okay. Most of our problems are with believing, and we try to believe harder. So we find ourselves getting involved in the "Power of Positive Thinking", in all kinds of little techniques, emotional and intellectual, that we feel will somehow make our belief stronger. Our whole concentration is on the mental arena.

Our fellowship is not, for instance, primarily an experience of prayer and love. Our fellowship consists primarily of discussing with other Christians other people's views. What does Billy Graham think of this -- or what do you think of prophecy -- or what do you think is going to happen in these last days -- or how do you interpret the events in the Middle East -- or how do you interpret this verse of Scripture? Our fellowship is primarily not a matter of prayer and love but of mental exercise of the exchange of mind opinions -- and we therefore find ourselves in a very mental kind of Christianity. Everything is bound up with this head-believing. Even our battles to keep our hearts up during the day when there are trials is primarily, "I'm not believing hard enough. If only I believed more, then I'd be okay." So, we who are natural-born people, who are trying to persuade ourselves by our own self-effort that we are real children of God, are always preoccupied with this mental-belief problem. That is what our Christianity is to us. It is a kind of hard, mind/imagination game.

Now, there are some characteristic marks besides those that I've mentioned. Besides those marks of being preoccupied with arguments over doctrine or with what we believe or what we think, also we are always very uncertain. When a sermon like this is preached on a Sunday morning, we get a bit shuddery, and we begin to wonder, "Yeah, maybe I'm not really a Christian." So those of us who are involved in primarily mental belief get shook fairly easily. We are very uncertain of ourselves. We are very uncertain whether we are children of God or not. We can easily be rocked. We are always seeking and never somehow finding -- always restless and never settled.

The truth, of course, that convinces us most clearly that we are not supernaturally born of God is that we are not saved from our sins. That is the mark of a child of God. You remember the promise made to Mary was that, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The mark of people who are involved in easy believism is that they are not saved from their sins. They claim they are saved IN their sins, but not FROM them. They still have trouble with the old problems: they still get angry, they still criticize, they are still dishonest. They are not saved from their sins. In fact, they find themselves coming under the description in James 4:17, "If you

know what is right to do, and fail to do it, for you it is sin." They find themselves in that position.

They know certain things, in fact, their whole business is knowledge. They have it all in their heads and they know certain things are wrong, but they keep doing them. They cry out with Paul. "The good that I would I cannot do, and the evil I hate, that is what I do." They find that they don't come under the description of children of God, "Whoever is born of God does not commit sin." They find, "Well, I'm trying to pretend I'm born of God, but I do commit sin, but, well maybe I'm some other type of Christian." So the very verses of Scripture that they try to remember in their heads continually condemn them. The mark of mental believers who are not really born of the spirit is that they're not saved from their sins.

They have all these beliefs. They move in Christian circles. They believe the things that Christians believe. They hold all the views that Christians hold. In fact, they'll hold the whole Republican Bible-belt line very tenaciously -- but their lives have sin in them and have failure and defeat in them. What's the explanation? Really it's a simple one. I can explain it to you so easily.

The mistake that we make, those of us that are naturally born people, who are trying by the power of our mental belief to make ourselves children of God -- our mistake is that we think that by holding certain intellectual concepts, God thereby changes our lives. It's as if we come into an operating theater, the Cross, and here is the operation, the death of Jesus, and someone says to us, "Do you realize that if you believe into Jesus, if you believe yourself INTO that operation?" That is the Greek word in the New Testament -- i.e. you believe into -- every time the New Testament talks about becoming a Christian, it says, "Do you not know that those of you who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life."

That is the whole teaching of the Gospel. If you allow the Holy Spirit to make Jesus' death real in your life, then you would be saved from your sins, and your life would be made whole. Yet thousands of us say, "Yes, I believe that, so I must be a child of God." Do you see that? You stand outside the operating theater and say, "I believe that operation would make me whole. I believe it would take out of my life all the attitudes that spoil my life. I believe it. I believe it would make me right with my Maker. Therefore, I believe I'm a child of God." It's laughable. It's ridiculous. It's meaningless. You wouldn't dream of doing it in a real physical situation.

Do you see that believing Jesus' death takes away your sins does NOT take away your sins? It is simply the first step in believing yourself into that dear Person on the cross, so that his death can actually operate in your life, and take away your sins. It is a tragic situation because you know the greater part of Christendom is caught in this deception, that the very act of believing that Jesus' death will take away my sins means my sins are taken away. THEY ARE NOT. Every time the Bible talks about belief it is not talking about a mental assent. It is not talking about an acceptance of concepts — it is "peitho" -- the Greek word for obey or submit yourself to.

Even after Paul had said "Listen, you have a personality that is perverted and twisted beyond belief, through you trying to get love from people when you should be trying to get it from God. Now the only way you are going to get the love from God is by allowing that perverted personality to be destroyed in Jesus. That is what God did to you in Jesus. In a cosmic miracle, he destroyed that perverted personality of yours. Now if you allow him to do that, and make that real in your life, the Holy Spirit will fill you with God's love and new life." We tend to hear that, and we tend to say, "If I believe that, then it is done." It is not. It is not done unless you enter into ALL of

that. So the greater part of Christendom is caught in this silly, foolish situation, where it under-interprets what "believe" is, and thinks it means if I believe Jesus' death saves me from my sin, then magically I'm saved from my sins, in spite of the fact that there is no beauty or fragrance in my life. In spite of the fact I still fight all the anger and bad temper I have ever "fought". Thus they continue to bluff themselves that the very act of accepting that belief changes them. Loved ones, it does not.

The only way you can be saved from your sins, the only way you can be born supernaturally from above by God's Holy Spirit, is to come into the old operating room and say, "Holy Spirit, I don't know all that is involved here, I know I have a personality that is rotten, and I know that it gets angry and bad-tempered and selfish, and I can't control it. Holy Spirit I believe God my Creator put that personality into his Son Jesus and on Calvary, and a cosmic miracle destroyed it. Holy Spirit, I don't know how you're going to make this real in me, but I put myself before you now and ask, will you show me what I have to be willing for in order to be immersed in Jesus' death and to die to my self-rights and be freed from the mess that I am. And then, as Jesus was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, I ask you to raise me up and make me a new person completely.

Then you must go into that room and place yourself on that Cross (that operating table), and allow the Holy Spirit to probe into your insides and to begin to put his finger on the sore spots. If the Holy Spirit says you gamble, and if you are going to be in Jesus and go through death into everlasting life, you can't take that with you. Now will you stop gambling? The Holy Spirit puts His finger on uncleanness in your life, on promiscuity in your sexual behavior, and says, "That isn't in Jesus," or "that this has to go -- now are you willing to stop that if you are going to be placed into Christ and raised up a new person and be completely transformed?" Thus, bit by bit, the Holy Spirit will probe with his dear finger on the painful sore spots in your life. And then, when he stops probing and says, "This is the last one, will you do this?" -- and a sense of rest comes into you because you know there is nothing else you have a controversy with God about; that was the last one.

You know there is a deep "yes" in you, a yes which says, "Lord, will you do it? I accept it by faith and I obey you Holy Spirit from this day forward." Then, the Holy Spirit comes in and fills you with a free attitude to your Father Creator, and regenerates you and makes you a completely new person and places a new motivational center within you -- a new heart, that feels like Jesus, and thinks like Jesus, and wills like Jesus. And you become a child of God to whom the Father can fulfil His promises.

Now I ask you -- will you, yourselves, decide where you stand -- and if you have been involved in purely mental belief up to this moment -- will you now take part in your dear death and resurrection in Jesus -- and will you take part in a supernatural birth? And then, loved ones, I found the promises of God are 'Yea' and 'Amen', and God does keep his promises to the children to whom he made them.

Let's Pray. Dear Father, we would come before you now and tell you, Lord, there is nothing that we are afraid to see that you want to show us, and Lord, we don't care how much uncertainty there is inside us. You have shown us a plain sure way of coming into certainty. We thank you for this. And Lord God, we would cast away this purely mental acquiescence that we have had for years. We see Father, that this is not a purely intellectual commitment, but a volitional commitment, a commitment of our lives, a willingness to be obedient to you from this day forward. And Lord God, we would commit ourselves to that. Lord, I pray for any brother or sister who needs to make a commitment that

you will guide them to the prayer room and enable them to make a definite step that will change everything this very day. Now the Grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and ever more. Amen.