



Walking on Eggshells Into an Empty, Judgmental Faith

By Silas Apollo



I got 'born again' some time in 2009, a few months to August when I was supposed to join college for my undergraduate studies.

The message that I had been born again came as good news to my father, with whom I had been having a difficult relationship with while I was in high school. In fact, he had initially objected to my joining a university as a self-sponsored student, since I had failed to attain the points that would see me join a government-sponsored student.

His argument was that my record in high school as a rebellious student and my 'lack of focus' was all because I had dropped out of the Christian Union while in school, that this to blame for my poor results. And so, I had to pay for my sins.

So, when I got saved, the news came as a relief to him. He would occasionally use me as an example to my sisters. Being born again also came as a relief to me at the time, because it helped me mend some of my broken relationships.

I continued with this newly acquired status to college, where I practiced my Christian faith with much pride and gusto. Soon, I was thrust into the top most leadership position in the Christian Union while still in first year, a feat not achieved to many people.

But my reason for writing this article is to demystify some of the biblical teachings I was exposed to as a child, throughout my youth, and even now as I work on becoming a better man. These teachings in my view only worked towards instilling in me a guilty conscience and a judgmental attitude that could only see others for the sins they committed, and how unworthy they were for the gospel and the saving grace of Christ.

Consequently, these Christian teachings, also failed to mold me into the man I was to become, but instead forced me to become something that was only appealing to my parents, our Christian family friends and my Christian friends. Deep down, I had struggles with identity issues and esteem. And in the process of trying to live on the straight and narrow, I also lived a double life, full of guilt and hypocrisy.

I was raised in a Christian home, where both my parents were born-again way before we were born. My exposure to this religious way of life therefore started as far back as I can remember.

In Sunday school, we would be taught memory verses, most of which we recited in front of the congregation during services, to much applause. During open-air services hosted by our church in the town centre, we would occasionally be asked to recite these verses to the audience. And therefore, to my parents and peers, we were model children, brought up the right way and in the fear of the Lord.

But what I do not recall are instances where we were taught how we could navigate some of life's toughest phases. My problems began at adolescence. Science says that it is at this stage where one starts to experience changes in their body, mind and emotions, as they transition through puberty and later into adulthood.

All I was taught as an adolescent was that interacting with girls and having them as friends would lead me to sin. What I was not taught was how to love myself, practice self-control and create boundaries. How I wish I was also taught how understand my body and the changes I would experience. Instead we were merely bible-slapped on the consequences of befriending girls.

The problem I have with the Christianity that most practice today, and even the one I was exposed to as a child, is that it lacks wholesomeness. The teachings are either meant to guilt-trip us into behaving in a certain way or judge others for not practicing the same faith and living by the virtues we ascribe to.

Growing up, my father - in an attempt to instill in me what he then believed, and still believes are Christian values - considered sexual sin, drinking alcohol, as well as smoking cigarettes and bhang as some of the biggest sins one can commit against God. And to drive his point home, he would use his brothers who were heavy smokers and drinkers, as the bad examples that I should not emulate. His examples would also include some of our neighbors.

The issue with this approach, as I would later learn in life, is the fact that instead of my parents guiding me through life based on the teachings of the Bible, only pointed to me how sinful others were. And that to become a better Christian, I should never emulate them. My moral compass therefore, was that I should focus on what they were doing wrong and try not copy them. The idea was to create in us the perfect Christian, devoid of sin and flaws, who would grow up to become model adults.

While it is worth noting that these warnings kept me away from 'bad company', my struggles were on whether these practices borrowed from of anything in the Bible. We focused so much on what the Bible says so little about, if we are to be honest. It also sparked in me questions of what grace and

forgiveness was all about. I wondered if it was in our place to determine the fate and destiny of others based on their present circumstances.

The Bible in fact, teaches us that all have sinned and fallen short of the grace of God. All I was told and taught was how sinful others were, and not how I should live based on the teachings of Christ.

My father, in this endeavor, had become the moral judge of who was committing more sin than the other. While it was not explicitly clear to me then, now I am beginning to question whether he had the moral authority to judge others, given the many flaws that I experienced first-hand and saw in him.

My childhood, as I had indicated in a previous article published here, was marred by violence where my father at any slightest provocation, would beat all of us including my mother. Therefore would it not have been right for him to make peace with my mother first, before pointing out the sins of others, just as Jesus teaches us not to point the speck of sawdust in our brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in our own eyes?

And beyond the teachings in my household, this trend also extended to the churches we attended. Back then, while growing up, the Christian gatherings we were part of were closely knit ones, where everyone was regarded as family. But if my memory serves me right, my parents moved us many times from one church to the other, simply because of differences in ideology and even principles with the leadership of one church.

Often times, these differences would split the church almost in the middle and would be fights over money or the exclusion of a part of the congregation because they were not of the same social class as the rest. What then, does that teach a child like me growing up, about the fact that before God all are equal irrespective of their status in the society? It was certainly not practiced in the churches that we were a part of.

What of the teachings of the Bible that implore on husbands to love their wives just as Christ loved the church? Yet for me, all I witnessed growing up was a father beating up my mother even for the simplest of mistakes like putting too much salt in food or coming home late.

It is worth noting that I still believe in God, and religiously so. I say my prayers and go to church. But the problem I have with the Christianity of today is the hypocrisy I saw growing up, and that it has become so irrelevant and out of touch with the realities of modern times.

I recently had a conversation with a friend with whom I fellowship with in the same church about why men in church do not date or marry women in church and vice versa.

Her reasoning, and mine too, was that part of the reason why people in church opt to date and marry outside is that our Christianity lacks authenticity. The church has become a place where one cannot be vulnerable about their struggles in life. We have become judgmental, to the extent that one would find it hard admitting that they struggle with say jealousy, depression or even addiction.

Most Christians, especially the born-again lot, have also increasingly become detached from the realities of life. Some of them, based on the teaching that 'two cannot walk together unless they agree', would rather not associate with non-believers, lest they become contaminated by the sins of the world.

Our teachings in church, in my view, have failed to speak to the problems that we as millennials face, like struggles with esteem, identity, building good and lasting friendships and relationships, dealing with the pressures of life which have been magnified by the advent of social media, just to

mention a few.

In the Bible study I attend in one of the mega-churches in Nairobi, not once have I had instances where the Bible verses we discuss reflect on the issues we face in life. It is instead a quick pasting on of solutions, which fall apart in the face of daily living. It makes me wonder what the very essence of the church is if it cannot be the place where one finds solace and refuge, where the broken-hearted go to find healing. And especially to my agetates, millennials, who have been judged and ridiculed for the life choices we have made, from careers, to social and even political inclinations. What has the church got to say to us, about the life we find ourselves in?

But what I did not realize then was the fact that my salvation was one that I practiced with guilt, and the fear of not wanting to fall into temptations and sin. The result of this is I always felt like I was walking on eggshells. And part of this fear is what had been instilled in me by my father, and my failure to live the Bible on my own, make mistakes, ask for forgiveness from God, and soldier on.

I never experienced a childhood of forgiveness, or seen forgiveness practiced, even in the Christian Union that I served in. Committing a sin would expose one to a life of ridicule and judgment, especially from the conservative Christians with whom we fellowshiped together and to whom sin was not to be tolerated, no matter what.

In my capacity as an executive committee member - the senior most leadership position in the Christian Union - I was in charge of a small group of young, vibrant, urban and born-again men and women. But more often than not, we would clash with more conservative members of the fellowship.

These frictions would be about the slang language that this group used, their type of music, which mostly included reggae and rap music, their dress code, which included women wearing trousers to church, among others. But surprisingly though, while some of these conservative Christians maintained their reputations until they graduated, some would later be accused of cheating, having multiple relationships, while others were involved in pre-marital sex that they abhorred and preached against.

So while I am in no way trying to cast the first stone, instead I want to understand the intolerance and hypocrisy. Why is it that some who were adamant about the preaching and practicing 'the born-again life' still happened to fall short of the glory of God?

I still maintain that I am a child of God, a Christian and a faithful one at that, but who still drinks alcohol and parties once in a while. The problem I have with these 'born-again' demands is that they are mostly for self-gain and self-righteousness. In my view, many preachers, Christians and churches today would rank very low on living lives that are Christ-like, which the Bible they carry around and profess teaches.

My belief is that Christianity, just as Jesus taught while on earth, should be one that speaks into the issues and problems that people face, lest all we do is Bible-slapping people and guilt-tripping them into living lives devoid of fulfillment, purpose and love.

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