



Be Aware of Cynicism

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Recently, I have met a young man who was “coming out” from the church. Not as homosexuals, but as philosophical cynics, claiming as follows: “Christianity in Korea is now should be called as ‘dog-ianity’ (kedockyo). I don’t want to be one of them. The ugly Christianity is not trustworthy any more for me. It’s not only inferior to the theory of evolution or naturalism but lower in quality, value, or estimation of life style for human beings.”

I wish it was an impulsive reaction found among a few young, but the tragedy is that it is not so limited. Many other young people are cynically laughing at Christians who believe there are not only no more true to the reality but beauty and love in Christianity. I hope this is not too late chance for Christianity in Korea and cynical people in the world.

With heart broken pain, I would talk about three things on this paper: what are the typical patterns of cynicism, what the causes of cynicism are and how we can prevent falling into the trap of cynicism and overcome cynicism as individuals, as a church and as philosophically and spiritually.

1. Typical patterns of cynicism

There are so many different forms of cynicism: Cultural, individual, political, social, spiritual, philosophical, and psychological, etc. However, the most dangerous and destructive kind is the philosophical cynicism that is bitter, scornful and mocking distrust of the ultimate truth. These days, philosophical cynicism can be viewed as a new trend because it is so much more prevalent than in the past.

A young woman who visited L'Abri Korea said to me, “When I was young, I was enticed by Dualism. During my years in college, I was captivated by Mysticism - I heard the voice of so called God. After college, I became cynical to everything, including Christianity. All of this has happened in the past 7 years.”

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Having been confused by Dualism, she had much difficulties learning and growing true spirituality; Dualism divides this world into two; the material and the mental. In the material realm there is the body, senses, and reason of man. These are only temporary things and imperfect “shadows”. Soul or the spirit belongs to the mental realm, and it is thought as perfect and eternal “idea”. So she went to a Christian college.

During her college years, she was led to various charismatic and/ or mystical forms of Christianity that practiced speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, and seeing visionary things, etc. In all of this, however, she didn't have enough opportunity to learn about the Gospel and Christian mind sets based on the Bible. Eventually she decided to stay away from church altogether. As she sadly confessed, she became cynical to everything, including Christianity. Many other young people have gone astray to end up in cynicism, particularly, cynicism directed toward Christianity and faith.

2. Causes of cynicism

No one becomes cynical all at once, but rather, they become so gradually. It's common that people usually end up in cynicism after trying out Christianity for a while. They may have started out their journey with sincere heart but they may have either encountered a seemingly irresolvable road block or perhaps they got upset by the immaturity of churches. There are so many different causes of cynicism.

(1) General causes of cynicism. Some would say that it's because of Christianity is being illogical, shallow and unintelligent for long time. This is probably due to the fact that Christians claim that Christianity is the only truth and the only way to spiritual salvation. Some would say Christianity is narrow-minded rejects “religious pluralism.” It is opposed to the modern norm of “tolerance.” In their eyes, it is problematic because churches claiming exclusive ownership of the truth, share the same moral and ethical problems with the society they are living in.

Some would say that the non-biblical elements behind the rapid growth of the Korean church are the causes. There has been dualism, which is Gnostic and authoritarian; and mysticism, which is charismatic and falsely spiritual. These two elements not only have contributed to the growth of the Korean church but have also caused its weakness and cynicism. I believe, these two elements are not only the major obstacles but the patterns of the decline of the Korean Church.

A staff member of IVF say it's because the lack of sincerity. The absence of sincere friends, sincere parents, and sincere teachers may lead to cynicism. Teachers say it's because of the loss of curiosity. The absence of curious questions, curious inquiry, and curious passion may lead to cynicism. A university student might say it's because of ignorance. The absence of knowledge,

wisdom, and a habit of deep thinking may lead to cynicism. It is possible that all are partly right.

(2) Psychological causes of cynicism. Dick Keyes, at Southborough L'Abri near Boston in U.S., characterized accurately the prominent causes of cynicism in his wonderful book, "Seeing through Cynicism." I would like to summarize here only the three major causes he insightfully studied:

Cynicism comes from the desire for self-protection. It is to protect oneself against falling into despair or being disappointed. By making sarcastic remarks or speaking cynically, one can justify why he or she doesn't have to be responsive to or responsible for a certain subject. It is a way to create distance between oneself and the source of disappointment. Considering all the disheartening news of the day, which young people grow up with, we can understand why they seek refuge in cynicism.

Moral apathy is another reason for cynicism. Instead of trying to fix injustice and lawlessness it is far more easy to simply be cynical about them. A cynic can simply toss in one or two statements about why nothing will be fixed, and it relieves the guilt caused by doing nothing because, after all, nothing can be done. However, cynic, at least, knows that the world is doomed and they perceive its harsh reality. They express their cynicism but they won't do anything about it.

Cynicism can also come from elitism or pride. The perception that "I" am the smartest, the most educated, and the most intelligent one makes a cynic think that everything, no matter how good it may be, around him/her is trivial. Their feeling of superiority is not limited to the issue of knowledge. They would discredit anything that does not fit into their taste.

(3) Philosophical causes of cynicism. Cynicism is may caused by a deep despair of hopelessness or "nihilism with a smile" as J. F. Lyotard described. If cynicism is something beyond nihilism, King Solomon realized well enough that the fundamental motivation for pursuing success came from jealousy no matter how nobly one may package his motivation. (cf. Ecclesiastes 4:4) He cheered something derisive in his words that "wisdom is better than strength or weapons: nevertheless wisdom is despised or destroyed," (Ecclesiastes 9:16-18)

And he was well aware of the relationships between an individual and a society and between the pursuance of success and its psychology and the issues of truth and philosophy. Solomon once lamented in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1:2, KJV). This word has been interpreted that the preacher was lamenting nihilism. Nihilism is an extreme form of skepticism that denies all existence and a rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value and a willingness to repudiate all previous theories of morality or religious belief. This was the case when we

translated the word hebel in Hebrew as 'vanity.'

Today, there is a strong argument that the word hebel in Hebrew should be translated into 'absurd', 'the manifestly irrational', and 'meaningless' rather than 'vanity.' As you may know, NIV (New International Version) translated from hebel into 'meaningless' more than 20 years ago: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" (Ecclesiastes 1:1) In this case, hebel could mean something beyond the nihilism. It could be interpreted "a rhetoric of cynicism" as Dick Keyes reported.

3. Overcoming cynicism

Who can get out of the iron fist of this cynicism? Life throws at us curve balls unexpectedly. It may be everyone's experience that, in those days, we do not know what to expect next, get exhausted and completely disappointed that we lose any drop of hope; we perceive that all efforts were in vain and don't see that anything good can ever happen to us again. Five suggestions are made as follows:

(1) Don't straighten crooked: Remember what King Solomon said, "Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?" (Ecclesiastes 7:13) It means that you should not dare to straighten things that God has crooked it intentionally but should trust God. "Crooked" means the challenges and difficulties that we encounter in our life - something that is hard to accept; and many occasions, we do not know what caused those situations. But the Ecclesiastes says that God allowed it to happen to you and if God has done that with intention, who can undo it!

It may be to the contrary of what we have learned from schools or our culture, the Word implies that 'we have to simply accept the situation that we cannot straighten, fix, add, or remove with our capability'. The Wiser man said, "What is crooked cannot be straightened and what is lacking cannot be counted," (Ecclesiastes 1:15) "Accepting" something means 'being obedient to God' - giving up the thought of trying to change others, giving up our own methods and efforts to change circumstances, and acknowledging whatever God is doing around us and trusting Him that He is in control. This is the first Wisdom of Solomon in coping with Cynicism.

(2) Enjoy daily life: In the Ecclesiastes, the preacher starts with complaints and cynical comments about life, but suddenly he changes his tone. "Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart ... Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun... Whatever Your Hand Finds to

Do, Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might ...” (Eccl. 9:7-10, cf. Eccl. 2:24, Eccl. 8:15)

Why would he suddenly say that nothing is better than enjoying life eating and drinking and pursuing pleasure? It may be because, when we are tired of our daily life and when we find ourselves in trouble or in a dead end, ‘the only way of life available for us’ may be just enjoying whatever seems still within our reach at that moment. If we are willing, we should be able to find something around us that we can find joy from. Remember that even the time of the worst imaginable is by design and intervention of the Creator, trust Him that we are under His watchful eyes, and find joy from every single trivial thing. This is the second wisdom Solomon found out.

(3) Don’t forget your duty: The preacher repeats “for this is the whole duty of man” (NIV) three times. This is the same as saying “for this is whole of man” (ASV). I interpret that it means the whole duty of man is to accept God & His works. The preacher points out three particular areas.

1) Duty of young adults is to “remember also your Creator in the days of your youth ...” (Eccl. 12:1)

2) Duty of adults is to remember that “the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it,” (Eccl. 12:7)

3) Duty of all mankind is to “fear God and keep His commandments” (Eccl. 12:13)

(4) Keep seekers minds: We should carefully examine our hidden motivations of cynicism. Let me ask you a few questions: Are you willing to accept your failure or are you quick to cover up for yourself by criticizing others or laughing at other people? Do you think all the troubles within modern day society are because of unrighteousness and unlawfulness? How about your attitude toward success - is it really to serve others or is it motivated by the desire to do better than others and showoff?

In order to combat cynicism, we must keep the mentality of seeker as long as we live. We need patience when we are sincerely seeking Truth. We need to hold on to the “honest question” that we have started with. As we make our journey toward the Truth, we should be careful not to make hasty judgments based on mistaken on some perceptions. Our judgments should be postponed until we have gathered adequate information to speak accurately, not cynically. In addition, if you hit the blockade, you don't need to hastily make a conclusion. It is okay to leave it “undetermined” until you find the real answer.

(5) Turn to bible-believing Christianity: The false belief-system in our churches creates not only cynicism but also many other problems. Before it’s too late, it would be nice to turn to

the bible-believing Christian community and worldview. We should try to clean ourselves of any hint of Dualism and unhealthy Mysticism, and go back to the basics - faith only, Bible only, and God only.

Like the days of Elijah, we should not sit on the fence between idols and God. "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." (1 Kings 18:21) Holy community is at the crossroad, because double dealing is a straight road to judgment.

The church must acknowledge other dangers in resisting cynicism. 1) We may end up with the dark era of strong legalism, or even clericalism. That would be a crisis to churches and create significant deterioration of our society. 2) We may end up with the other pitfall of rationalism or new pietism and intuitionism. Historically, it took only 100 years from Reformation to Pietism in the 17th century in Europe.

Conclusion

A cynical grim reality is spread on a worldwide level. Be aware of it! Richard Dawkins, an English scientist, claimed that "the Christian God is made up" (The God Delusion). He also insisted that "denying God is not wrong but is a way to find true love which is the core value of human being. One can be sufficiently passionate and spiritual even without God."

I believe that Dawkins's love is a connotative love or rather a self-actualization or self-dependence, but it's very interesting that he cynicism toward religion is matched by an optimistic belief in the goodness of human nature. Dawkins is so powerful at the time that no one dare defy him at the moment because he is backed by the confidence of the humanism. He is too clever by half with urges his followers to have faith in their own humanity rather than faith in God.

Don't forget that cynicism is not the end. A rationalism or intuitionism will follow soon after the cynicism. It is my dearest desire that no one would be so proud not to accept God's way that you would take everything in your own hands. Remember the honest answers to the cynicism on this paper. I have some hope of changes back to the authentic Christianity.