

## ***Consistency***

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### **2 Corinthians 1:18-22**

***“For in [Christ] every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’.”***

#### ***Movement 1 – Hyper-Criticism***

Whom do you trust? Let me start with a reference to a *Simpson’s* episode. The town of Springfield found itself with some extra money, and the people gathered together in a town meeting to decide how best to spend the money. In the midst of the outlandish visions and suggestions, a stranger in the back spoke up and offered an idea. He suggested that the town use their money to build a monorail. The town needed a train of the future to bring jobs, fame, and ease of transportation to all of the people of Springfield. Maybe it was the song the stranger used to pitch his idea, maybe it was the time of the evening and people were tired and susceptible, but the crowd went with the idea, and trusted the stranger leaving with a song on their lips and hope in their heart. Again, I ask, whom do you trust? This *Simpson’s* episode points to absurdity of townspeople eating the idea that was fed to them by a complete stranger. In reality, if someone were to bring an idea like that to the town of Bryn Mawr, and if he or she were not laughed outright, he or she would be scrutinized, criticized, and questioned in every way possible. The absurdity of this example is that such an idea would never pass in the manner that it did with the town of Springfield, because we would not offer that level of trust to a stranger with a strange idea. It is an example that can lead us to ask ourselves, whom do you trust?

I ask the question assuming that your level of trust and acceptance would be cautious with every new idea, with a different way of doing things, and with something foreign to the normalcy that you enjoy day in and day out. With each thing new and different, we peer through a monocle of doubt, distrust, and skepticism. We peer through the lens of harsh reality looking for the catch, looking for the first sign that all is not a good, as it seems, and looking for the bubble to burst. You receive a note from Ed McMahon saying that you may already be a winner, but you know that the hope is misplaced, and the likelihood is that you may already not be a winner. A new pastor introduces a different form of worship, and our first response is to look for all the reasons it won’t work and the reasons why the Spirit won’t move us in the worship setting. A politician offers a new tax code and we look for all the reasons why it won’t benefit us directly. Many of the boomers here remember the words of Jack Weinberg; “...we don’t trust anybody over thirty,” (from *Interview on Free Speech Movement at University of California, 1964*). Since the boomers have grown and passed on the skepticism, our society is flush with mistrust, doubt, and disbelief. From institutions to individuals and from groups to movements we live with a caution that we do not relinquish easily. Whom do you trust?

#### ***Movement 2 – Anxiety and Criticism of the Church***

Can you trust the church? Can you look at the church and see a place of true sanctuary, or do you see yet another fallen, broken, and inconsistent institution? Is the church the kind of place where you feel safe enough to let your guard down, or are you always watching who is talking to whom, how you are being treated and waiting for someone to say “yes and no” at the same time? Can you trust the church?

There are many who do not trust the church, the ideas of Christ, and those who call themselves Christians, for a variety of reasons. One reason that I would like to consider today is

the perception of hypocrisy and inconsistency, which breed, and broods in the sacred walls of the church. Go back thousands of years, and we can see such skepticism with the early church in Corinth. When Paul was working with the Corinthians, he was offering a new idea to the community, and that idea was received with a fairly large dose of skepticism. Paul, an outsider to the Corinthian society and community, was offering a hope about Christ, who was connected to a different belief system than the Gnostic cults offered. This hope of Christ came from the area of Jerusalem, a different town with a different social and cultural context, different values, and different world-views. You can imagine that Paul was greeted with an amount of skepticism. Paul must have worked hard to build up trust, and then Paul leaves the community to work on its own. Paul claimed that he would return again in a couple of months. But the months passed, and still no sign of Paul. Now the doubt was growing, and people wondering if they could indeed trust Paul. The Biblical scholar Eugene Best and others have argued that some in the Corinthian community have accused Paul of being inconstant in his promises, of saying “yes” and “no” at the same time. His words said, “yes, I’ll be back,” but his actions said, “I have no intention in returning.” As the doubt and skepticism grows, Paul’s character becomes under attack, and he is perceived as one who cannot be trusted. And as some question Paul’s character, no doubt they may question the nature of his message as well.

Have you ever had this experience as well? Have you ever been told one thing by the church and then treated a different way. Have you seen or been a part of those churches that say “yes” and “no?” Some churches claim that all are welcome, but if you don’t fit a certain mold, if you don’t live in a certain neighborhood, or accept certain beliefs, then you aren’t really welcome in that church. The church says “yes and no.”

Some churches claim to be concerned for the poor. But the needs of the building take precedence, the comfort of the members of the congregation is given priority over feeding the poor and the uncomfortable of the world, and the work that is needed to reach out to the poor is greater than many want to expend. So the poor are mentioned but not helped. The church says “yes and no.”

Some churches claim to offer a gospel of love and forgiveness. But churches cast members out, churches hold grudges, and churches spout angry rhetoric at those they disagree with. Churches say “yes and no”

Families have been burned by churches and Christians have advocated persecution throughout history. Christians and churches have said “yes and no.” So many churches are seen as hypocritical and self-serving. There is a mark of inconsistency in the story of the church that discredits our reputation as people of the light, that complicates our message of Christ, and that spoils many chances to share the gospel with the non-believer. Can you trust an institution that says “yes and no” at the same time? Can you trust the church?

### ***Movement 3 – A Human Attempt at Consistency***

Many Christians and churches have worked hard to be consistent in order to regain trust. They have heard the criticism, they understand why many are unhappy, and want to offer an alternative and an institution that can be trusted. These are Christians who feel like they have been backed up against the wall, they are at the edge of the cliff, and reach out to grab anything with which they can hold onto in order to regain solid footing. Here is the mantra: be consistent! Pick one idea about God, and stay with it, follow it, and stick to it. Be consistent! So churches have wondered down different paths toward different ends in the hopes to regain trust through consistency. They have resolved to stay in one path and never stray no matter what the consequences may be. For example, liberals have reached out and grabbed onto the idea that God is a part of the world, working with the world to achieve something better. It is a good idea, one that many can agree to, and believe. But if one is to consistently stick with that idea of God is a part of the world, then the very God we worship through Jesus Christ, is the same God that is worshipped by Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Muslims. There may be overlap, but are you willing

to say that they are the same. And if that is the case, than what makes Christianity so special? Why go to church at all on a regular basis if all religions are equally significant? It is a radical tolerance that can lead to a weak understanding of living with Jesus. For if all religions are the same, and then all aspects within those religions are also the same. From the hate spouting radical to the blah spouting slob, all are welcome in the liberal house. But I can't sit when one is spouting hate, nor can I sit when one is spouting apathy. I can't sit when one claims that to be a Christian is the same as being a Jew or a Muslim or a Buddhist. They are not the same; they are not equal on all levels. The consistent adherence to tolerance and a hyper-immanent God is weak and flawed. God is above the process Follow that conception about God down a path in a consistent manner, and see if you like the results. To me it seems wishy-washy and weak and downright offensive to all the other religions.

Let's look at the other side. The conservatives have reached out and grabbed onto the idea that God is a lawgiver, separate from the world and judging the world, and waiting for the world to spiral into a hell on earth. The Bible is to be read literally, in black and white with no room for context, depth or complexity. Our morals are to be lived with the same degree of dichotomy; things are either right or wrong. God is watching the world, judging us and condemning us. If you aren't Christian then you are most likely going to hell, and there is no other way around it. Follow that conception about God down a path in a consistent manner and see if you like those results. People are for us or against us. There will be winners and losers. Forgiveness, mercy, and peace have no place on this path. Love is hard and demanding. It is harsh, controlling, and dangerous speech that simplifies everything to right and wrong. Such rhetoric and ideas have led to crusades, slavery, oppression of women, the justification of tyrannical kings and wars declared. It is harsh, simplistic, and a limited view of God.

Yet what else can we do? We want to be consistent, so we are going to have to be clear about our ideas of God and stick to them. We have heard the criticism that the church is not clear, and have responded by refining our understanding and idea about God. We have seen and experienced the inconsistency of the church and we have responded by offering something real and tangible to hold onto. Many churches and many Christians have indeed worked hard to regain the trust of the world by maintaining a level of consistency.

#### ***Movement 4 – The Drink is too Thick or too Watery***

In vacillating from one extreme to the other, nothing really suitable has been found by either extreme and the church is still saying 'yes and no.' It is as if we have to choose something even if there is nothing that feels quite right. But we don't want to be left in the ambiguity of neither. I grew up in a liberal context, I grew up loving everyone, giving everyone the chance and the opportunity, and letting everyone claim a truth. Yet I became tired of being walked upon, walked over, and letting others take advantage of my tolerance. The liberal inclusively becomes so broad that the boundaries of Christianity have become almost non-existent. I just don't think anyone who hasn't accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior and lived into that discipleship can truly and full know what it means when I say that I am saved. That isn't very inclusive.

Yet enough conservative churches have labeled me, I have been branded everything from "hell's spawn" to a solder of the "anti-Christ" and I have been condemned for questioned, challenging, and searching in my own faith that I don't think I can fall into that camp of rigid militaristic consistency. Neither are fulfilling spiritually in my walk with Christ.

I have grown up in a movement of Christianity that always looks to the poor, marginalized and outcast. I have learned to think of the other, to be respectful and thoughtful, and do whatever I can to help someone less fortunate than I. But there was a lack of emphasis upon my personal relationship with Christ. I was encouraged to walk with the least of our society, but not to walk with Christ because that may become intolerant, and I began to wonder if I was in a religious group or in a social help network.

I have been to conservative churches that really open up to the spirit in worship. These

are churches that emphasizes one's relationship with Christ, and living into that relationship. Yet I have seen those conservative churches focus only on the individual, personal relationship with Christ, and never look to the neighbor. I have heard things like, "there will be poor always so just spend your time praising Jesus. The poor have what they deserve, you have the opportunity to live with and love Jesus." I can't be that selfish with my Jesus. I can't ignore the call of Jesus and turn my back on others, but I need to know that I am walking with Christ. Neither is fulfilling.

Liberals accepting everything and conservatives accepting nothing, and I find myself surrounded in the din of shouting looking for God. Do we want to live the strict life of the Franklin planner, scheduling and preordaining our existence down to the fifteen minutes, or the lose and free life. The philosopher, Wittgenstein argued that this strict adherence to ideals or to reality could only lead to isolation and a denial of life. The mess of the world will always challenge the ideals of consistency. Maybe Paul was delayed in traffic. Maybe the Spirit led him elsewhere. Maybe Paul's yes was different than what the people expected. Yet Paul was labeled as untrustworthy and inconstant, and so many churches are labeled as inconstant.

So many churches have offered drink to the world in an attempt to regain trust, and the consistency claimed by the churches has made the drink to thick or to watery. The polarization of either or has led to neither. Nothing suitable is found.

### *Movement 5 – The Divine Yes*

The only rest and only trust is found in God's 'Yes.' Paul, doesn't defend his actions, but defends his trustworthiness; he defends his consistency by his company and his gospel. "Look to Christ, God's divine 'yes.'" Christ is God's consistency; Christ is God's fulfillment of every promise and every hope. God promised that Abraham would be the one to birth a great kingdom and Christ is the one who will bring that kingdom to reality. God promised Moses and the Israelites that they would have a kingdom of milk and honey, and Christ is the one who comes to proclaim the arrival of that kingdom. God promised David that his line would continue to lead Israel to glory, God promised the people that a messiah would reign, and Christ is that 'yes' to those promises. We look up in our own distress, in our own despair, and ask God if we can trust the holy promise of faithfulness and forgiveness. We look up after being burned by churches, after being scorned by other Christians, after being labeled and cast out by our brothers and sisters and ask God if we can find any consistency and any hope in the movement of Christianity. We have been let down by leaders, we have been let down by institutions, we have been let down by theologians, we have been let down by each other, and we look up for some word that will give us hope.

And God gives us Christ.

And God says 'Yes.'

Yes you will be my people; yes you will be forgiven. Yes you will know the bliss of the kingdom of God. Yes you will live into hope, you can trust, you can believe, and you can live in the arms of God. Never no and always yes says God through Christ.

Christ is God's 'yes.' Can we live into that 'yes?' We wonder if we can love the other, the different, the strange, the scary, and we see Christ sitting with the woman at the well. We see Christ touching the sick and the unclean. We see Christ going out to the sinners and dwelling amongst them. Christ gives us the strength to follow him. And God says 'yes.'

Christ is God's 'yes.' Can we live into that 'yes?' We wonder if we can live up to the moral expectations that we find in scripture after failing and falling, and we see Christ offering an outstretched hand to the tax collector for a new life. We hear of the acceptance of the prodigal son returning. We see Christ reaching out to Mary Magdalene, to Matthew the tax collector. Christ reaches out his hand of forgiveness to us. And God says 'yes.'

We cry out for consistency, and we are given the promise of Christ that remains true even through death. This is what is consistent, that God loves you, that Christ offers you forgiveness, and that your life with Christ will never be taken away no matter what. Not height, nor depth, nor

powers, nor principalities, nor angels, nor demons, nor liberals, nor conservatives, nor life, nor even death can separate us from the life and the divine yes we find in Christ. The theologian, Stanley Hauerwas claims that God's nature is known through the revelation of Jesus Christ. The God, who delivered the Israelites from Egypt, raised Christ from the dead. That is the consistency, which we seek. It is consistency, which promises that we will always be loved, we will always be forgiven, we will always be surrounded by the Holy Spirit, and we will always be a part of the mystical body of Christ. This rest, this assurance is found in Christ, God's 'yes.'

*Movement 6 – Living and Preaching God's 'Yes'*

We can be, and will be witnesses to God's 'yes.' The world looks for some kind of consistency upon which it can stand. Give the world the consistency of Christ. Give the world the hope of Christ. Call the world to follow Christ. We can be and will be witnesses to God's 'yes.'

You see, many of us fall into the trap of making God consistent in our mind, and sticking with that idea, evangelizing that idea, and it becomes weak and flawed. When we claim that God is all accepting, or angry, or judging we begin to limit God and walk down the paths of theological flaws. We can't control God. We can't explain God. We can't make the infinite, the divine, and the author of the cosmos consistent to our pea minds. It won't work, it can't work, and it isn't what is offered by Christ. It isn't the 'yes' that Christ gives to us. Instead of making our image of God consistent in our minds, we can live into God's image of who we are to be in a consistent manner. That image is known through Christ. We get a glimpse of it in the Bible. We get a glimpse of it in the prophets, in Moses, in David, but the fullness of God's image of who we are called to be is realized in Christ. We ask God to show us the way to live a true and full life, and God says, 'yes' through Christ. We won't be witness to doctrine, for doctrine will always fall short of the glory of God. We won't be witness to dogma for dogma restricts the glory of God. We will be a witness to the life that God offers and that we are called to live. What is that life? What does the Lord require of us, but to "do justice, love kindness and walk humble with our God?" What does the Lord require of us, but to Love the Lord our God with our heart, mind and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. What does the Lord require of us but to live into the kingdom where justice rains down and mercy flows with the stream. What does the Lord require of us but to feed the hungry, to cloth the naked and visit the sick? What does the Lord require of us but to share the love and the salvation of Jesus that we all have received?

Can we do it, God says 'yes.' Can we live into that image? God says 'yes.' Can we be the people of God that we have been gathered to be? God says 'yes.' Nothing can stand in our way for Christ is before us, the Spirit is in us, and God is with us. And people will no longer talk about what we believe. They will no longer scrutinize our inconsistencies in our theology. People will no longer ask how we deal with the inconstancies of our faith. People will see what we do. And that will be the witness to God's yes. Let go of your conception of God, and live into God's claim of us.

AMEN