

CASUAL RELIGION

We live in a casual age. This is reflected in many ways. We see casual dress in public; casual manners while dining; casual grooming when going out in public; casual conduct when in public places. Most would agree that a degree of casualness is harmless, even good. The stiff formality of the past was sometimes oppressive and even pretentious. Yet most mature observers will agree that many people take their casualness too far. Especially is it disturbing and distressing to see some extreme cases of casualness in the life of the church.

* Some are casual about the salvation of sinners. They do not take seriously the conditions God has set for receiving sinners into his family. In no uncertain terms he has told us that confession of faith, repentance and baptism are prerequisites for salvation (Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 2:38). These conditions are stated not once but in many places. Yet casual preachers are leaving the impression that one can be saved before and maybe even without baptism.

* Some are casual about the purpose of baptism. Many churches immerse, but few immerse for the reasons given by God. For most it is to join a denominational body. One is baptized for remission of sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Casual preachers imply that some might be saved even if they don't understand the proper reason for their baptism.

* Some are casual about their worship. The worship of God in many congregations cannot in any way be described as reverent. There is little or no solemnity. Such is manifested in preachers who treat their position in a casual way; with little serious study and preparation; with sermons that are more entertainment than reflections on the sacred things of God. Jokes, earthy stories and entertainment crowd out the study of the Holy Words of heaven.

* Some preachers are casual in their handling of the Scriptures. In place of "The Bible says," their sermons ring with, "I believe" or "Dr. So and So says," or "the majority believe." None of these have any currency with God, nor should they with Christians.

* Some are casual in their singing. They confuse fun songs and entertaining songs with worship to God. Others see no problem in replacing congregational singing, which the church from earliest times has practiced, with the performance of solists, duos, trios, quartets and choirs, all of which have no divine authority.

* Some are casual in the observance of the Lord's Supper. It is manifested in the demeanor and conduct of those presiding and serving. It is seen in the behavior of those in the pews. Many commune with little preparation of heart and mind, with an inclination to hurry through the observance; with a lack of somber thought and reflection. All of these reflect a casualness that is not wholesome.

* Even public prayer can be offered in a casual manner. Men who pray without forethought as to what they will say; men who talk to God of Creation as though he were their next-door neighbor do not reflect the proper reverence for God and his worship.

* A casual attitude toward worship can be seen in the way some folks dress. If you were invited to visit the president or some notable dignitary you would dress "up" for the occasion. For the funeral of a loved one, you would dress up. How do you dress to when you come to honor your Lord's death?

* Many moderns are casual in their daily discipleship. Jesus calls all men to be his disciples (Matt. 11:28-29). Those who accept the call are expected to take up their cross and follow him (Matt. 16:24). He expects us to love him above all others, even our closest kin (Matt. 10:37). We are to let our manner of life be worthy of the gospel (Phil. 1:27). We are to discern the signs of the times (Matt. 16:3). All of these and many other scriptures remind us of the seriousness of our life in Christ. For the forgiveness, the blessings and the salvation he gives us, in return he expects our lives, genuinely committed, not as a casual game of pretense!

Casualness is a common mark of those who feel empowered to change the faith, worship and practice of the Lord's church. Since Christ, our salvation, the church and God's word are the most important things in the

world, let every child of God treat them with the reverence and respect they deserve. JHW