

## The Dangers of Morality-Based Christianity

By: Bob Lenz

I am often asked, “Bob, how did you start speaking to youth?” My brother Bill was unavailable for a youth convention so he told them his little brother could probably do it. I agreed to it and did my first workshop for 20-30 youth. I tease my brother by pointing out that they never called him back and I’ve been a public speaker ever since. Just like any brother, he gets me back. Someone asked him, “When did Bob become a national speaker?” Bill chuckled and said, “When he put it in his brochure.” That’s not too far from the truth!

However, today, I have had the privilege of speaking in 49 states. I never intended to become a national speaker. I just loved youth. My heart was broken over the pain, abuse, rejection and neglect. I wanted to tell them that there is hope! I wanted them to know somebody cares about them and God loves them. I know this was God’s desire too because He opened doors to new areas of ministry I could never have entered on my own. Through the hard work of an energetic, freshman girl, I spoke at my first school assembly. Now I speak to over 100,000 people a year all across the nation. I got a C- in my high school communication course. Mr. Rosenbaum told me to never go into public speaking.

In the early years of speaking, my passion to share the Gospel and reach hurting teens was untarnished. As time passed and as I began to grow accustomed to the retreats, assemblies and conventions, something began to happen to the purity of my passion. God took me to Mexico to show me how I had wandered from His calling.

### *The Spirit Speaks in Mexico*

Years ago, my family and I went on a mission trip to Mexico. Each night the Lutheran church we were serving had a service. The worship was awesome and although I didn’t know what the pastor was preaching, it was powerful! Later, the pastor came up to talk to me through an interpreter. He asked if I would speak at their sister church the next afternoon. I quickly answered sure, that would be great. My mind was spinning. I could see it in my brochure already, “Bob Lenz –*International Speaker.*”

That night I prepared a message using what I had learned over the years. All the points started with “D” to match. To be honest with you, I thought it was pretty good. I was pumped! We were in a pretty nice section of Rio Bravo (that meant they had running water and cement floors). As we drove to the next section the poverty grew worse. The homes were made from sheets of metal, plywood, or cardboard.

I found out that the 4:00 p.m. service time wasn’t a new time-sensitive program because everyone was busy later, but rather it was a necessity. The church had no electricity so we had to end before dark. The little wood church had benches that weren’t even good enough to use at a cottage around the campfire. The crowd of 200 never came. Fifteen kids under the age of seven showed up. They didn’t come to hear a speaker from the United States; they came because we were giving out plastic bags with a wash rag, soap, toothbrush, and toothpaste in it. There I was with my “4-D” talk and a ready interpreter at my side. A quiet gentle voice of the Spirit of God spoke in my heart, “Bob, you came here to impress them. They don’t need to be impressed. They need to be loved.” I set aside my notes. We spent time with those kids telling them they were loved by us and by God.

That night, as I lay in bed, Jesus spoke to my heart again. He said, “When you are in front of a thousand high school kids, they don’t need to be impressed either. They need to be loved. They need hope. They need to know they are accepted and forgiven.”

How did it happen? How did I lose my focus on reaching hurting teens? Somehow I deserted my passion and was sidetracked in the process of pursuing God’s plan for my life. I wanted to be in the center filled of God’s will but I ended up in the left field of self-promotion.

### *Love Lost*

Something similar happens in a romantic relationship. Perhaps you can relate to a couple who told me, “We used to be in love. We could spend hours looking in each other’s eyes. We never ran out of things to talk about. We hated to be apart. There was passion, friendship and love.” “When did it change?” I asked. They pondered the question and the woman said, “I know when it happened, when we got married!” They both laughed. The tears of pain filled their eyes. The man said, “We’re so busy now with our kids, jobs, school, bills, yard work, cleaning, washing and on and on. I woke up one morning and looked at this person lying next to me and I didn’t know her anymore. Yes, we are still married. We have the routine. We’re still committed. But, there is no passion, no friendship and no love.” Why did this marriage end up in the left field of aloneness instead of the center field of marriage fulfillment.

As easy as it was for me to lose my focus on loving teens, and as easy as it is to lose the romance in marriage, is how easy it is to desert the Gospel.

## *Losing Our Focus*

Hear the voice of the Groom of Heaven longing for His bride on earth as He says in Revelations 2:3, *“You have persevered and endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary.”* He is saying good job, way to go! You’ve stayed faithful to your spouse, served your church body, taught your children values and kept the faith! However, verse four says, *“Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love.”* Although all is in order on the outside, something is missing in our relationship with Jesus. Instead of being in center field of a passionate relationship with Christ, we are in the left field of morality-based Christianity.

When we first fall in love with Jesus, everything is fresh. He is undeniably real as we encounter Him through His word, His people, communion and worship. Early in our Christian walks, we are convicted of issues like cheating, lying, drinking, cursing, stealing and lusting. We begin to listen to Christian music, serve at church, read Christian literature and have fellowship with believers. All of this is great, but it is dangerous when our goal is no longer loving Christ, but living like a Christian. Gradually, trying to live right replaces our relationship with Jesus. Paul warned the Galatians: *“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, (trying to be good) Christ died for nothing! You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit (become a Christian) by observing the law or by believing what you heard? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now made perfect by human effort? Galatians 2:21 – 3:3) No! No! No!*

Morality must be a by-product of our relationship with Christ, not the centrality of our heart. When morality becomes the god of the church of Christ, then the Gospel is void of its power.

Christianity is a relationship with a living God, the Creator of the Universe. It is not rules, religion, routine and regulations. One of the church fathers made it clear when he said, *“Jesus didn’t come to make bad men good, he came to make dead men live.”*

You may be saying, *“Okay, Bob. I see the difference, but what’s the big deal? You cautioned us about danger. How can an emphasis on morality in this sinful day be bad? We need all the help we can get.”*

When the passion of your heart is not Christ but morality, beware of two dangers of morality based Christianity.

## ***DANGER #1: PRIDE***

Have you seen the advertisements for the tricycle that has a pole coming out the back? The parents use the pole to push the tricycle when the child is too small to pedal. The child in the picture has a smirk on his face that seems to say, *“Look what I’m doing!”* I’ll let you in on a little secret. He wasn’t doing it. The same is true with our relationship with God. Romans 9:16 states, *“It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy.”*

If we think we are pedaling our own bikes, then Christ died in vain. If we have any righteousness, it has been bought by Christ. Scripture is clear; our own righteous acts are like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6)

There are two words that don’t go together, proud Christian. To be a Christian, you need to admit that you are a sinner and that you don’t deserve God’s love or Heaven based on good works, intelligence, or self-sacrifice. We deserve eternal punishment. My hope is only in God’s mercy. How can we be proud of something we can’t earn and don’t deserve? When we are concentrating on our accomplishments, we fall in unseen danger like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-14. *“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’”* His focus was not on God, but on himself and on his morality. He was proud. This could be a what a modern day Pharisee would say, *“God, I thank you that I endorse prayer in public schools. If I were on the Supreme Court, I would vote in The Ten Commandments. I’m pro-life and anti-homosexual. I only listen to Christian music. Thank you that I go to a Bible-believing, Spirit-filled church (not like that dead one down the street). I thank you that I didn’t have to go to public school. Thank you that I have Christianity Today saved on my internet’s “Favorite Places” and that I listen to Focus on the Family. I belong to the moral majority and boycott any store, show, or doctor that does not support traditional family values.”*

No matter where you stand on any of the areas mentioned here, the point I hope to make is that bashing your value on Christian accomplishments, leads to pride and to our second danger.

## ***DANGER #2: THE TASTE CHRISTIANS GIVE TO NON-CHURCHED PEOPLE***

I'm with non-Christian youth a lot. Most of them think of Christians as proud and judgmental. Because we curse the darkness instead of lighting a light, they see what we're against more than what we are for.

Aren't we glad that John 3:16 doesn't say, "For God so loved the world that He picketed it."? Aren't we glad that he didn't think we were so sinful He could never come here? Jesus, who is totally holy, pure and spotless, came to earth as Immanuel, God with us.

Youth live in a culture without hope. There is a boding sense of loneliness and emptiness. What do they taste of you and me if morality is our aim? They will only taste rejection and condemnation. However, if we are as salt to this world and we lift up Jesus, they will become thirsty for more of Him. John 3:17 says, "*For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.*" Do they taste His mercy, forgiveness, and unconditional love from you?

The musician, Marilyn Manson, was scheduled to do a concert in a Midwestern city. In case you're not familiar with him and his music, he makes Ozzy Osbourne look like a saint. Christians in the city were rightfully concerned about the band's influence on their kids and the community. They started a petition to stop the concert. They gathered an amazing 22,000 signatures. Despite the effort, the concert went on. The once-struggling ticket sales now skyrocketed and the show sold out. Christians made a stand against immorality and sin, but did they take a stand for JESUS? Was His name lifted up?

Consider this approach to the Marilyn Manson concert that a Nazarene music pastor suggested. He wondered what Jesus would have done in this case. He pictured Jesus eating supper with the band like He did with the "unholy" people of his day. This pastor decided he could be most like Jesus by calling the arena and offering to provide an extensive meal for the band. He thought they should be shown grace – unmerited favor. Although this approach is more difficult to pursue, it is centered on Christ's character and His mission.

Our only hope is to refocus on our relationship with Christ. We need a reunion and reconciliation with Jesus. We need to surrender to Him and ask forgiveness for our pride and for giving the world a bad taste of Him. Let's return to our first love and place Jesus at the center of our faith.

**Beware of morality-based Christianity for it is not Christianity at all!**

Article written by Bob Lenz with Life Promotions Inc., a non-profit youth organization committed to instilling hope, worth and value in youth.

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