

The Christian Life

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In our study of Conversion we noted how it was part of the Holy Spirit's work to convict the world of *righteousness*. Sin is not a matter to be treated lightly, nor is the grace of God to be regarded as a kind of medicine, periodically applied to help prevent the spread of disease. The converted man cannot continue in his old ways, relying on God to bail him out when necessary. On the contrary, he must live the life of Christ himself, "walking in holiness and righteousness before him" all the days of his life (e.g., Luke 1:75). The will of God, says Paul, is our sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

That much is clear from Scripture, and has been generally agreed in principle by serious-minded Christians throughout the centuries. It is a different matter though, when we come to consider what sanctification in practice involves. For Augustine and the medieval tradition which followed him, righteousness was regarded as a divine attribute which was progressively imparted to the believer by the means of grace. A baptized child received the cleansing from original sin which made it possible for him to enter the household of faith as a regenerate Christian, and the other sacraments and offices of the Church were there to help him grow in this initial grace. Much of this way of thinking, which was perfected in the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas and his disciples, was taken over, virtually unchanged, by the second generation of the Reformers, and so it has a familiar ring to us even today.

Nevertheless, the Reformation introduced a very different understanding of righteousness which goes right against the medieval system and makes it invalid. Martin Luther tried to acquire the sanctification which the medieval system promised him, but the more he laboured the more he realized that the root of sin in him was too deep to be eradicated by such means. Despairing of his salvation, Luther began to search the Scriptures, and there he discovered Paul's famous quote from Habakkuk (Romans 1:7):

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"The just shall live by faith". The full implications of this hit Luther like a thunderbolt and totally altered his understanding of the Christian Life. A righteous man did not have to earn his sanctification by a lifetime of religious devotions and good works. He was saved, not by works but by faith in Christ, who had not only paid the penalty for sin but clothed the believer in his own righteousness. This last point is of vital importance, because for Luther it meant that the justified man was still a sinner; nothing could or would change that. Moreover, it was to the glory of God that this should be so, since it demonstrated with blinding clarity that salvation could never be earned. To the end it was always a free gift of God, bestowed on unworthy recipients.

This teaching, which Luther summed up in the Latin phrase *simul iustus et peccator* is the basic tenet of Protestant spirituality. It removes the impossible struggle to become like God by nature, and frees the believer to enjoy the divine righteousness by faith, or as we would now say, in the context of a personal relationship with God. In its essence, the

In this issue Gerald Bray's series on basic Christian doctrines takes a searching look at sanctification and the practical demands of Christian living.



Christian life is a relationship of personal submission to and fellowship with the God of the Bible, who is made known to us in Jesus Christ and who comes to dwell in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

This fundamental principle makes it necessary to begin by saying that the Christian life is *life lived in the Spirit*. This phrase has taken on a somewhat esoteric tinge in recent years, thanks to the charismatic renewal. As a result many people imagine life in the Spirit to mean a semi-ecstatic kind of existence in which unusual gifts and heightened emotions play a major part. It is easy to discount experiences of this type, many of which are clearly artificial, but we must be very careful about this. Some people are given extraordinary gifts from God, and we must be prepared to accept them if they are genuine. The spirit of I Corinthians 12-14 is not one of outright rejection but one of caution; charismatic gifts are to be integrated into the wider life of the Church and are to be used for its edification, not for its destruction. What is important is that this wider context is one which is likewise given by the Spirit, but which is poured out on all Christians, whether they have received special gifts or not.

Life in the Spirit is not taught in I Corinthians 12 or 14, except by implication. It surfaces most clearly in I Corinthians 13, and is a recurrent theme in other New Testament epistles. The fundamental ingredient of this life is *love*. We are told, as much by John (see I John 4:7-5:3) as by Paul, that love is the necessary basis for every Christian action. Today, love is widely regarded as the supreme virtue, even at the expense of other principles. We are told that if love demands it, even the commands of traditional morality can be overturned. The difficulty with reasoning of this kind is that it is partly true. The question of whether a Christian should lie to the police when asked whether he is concealing a fugitive from unjust persecution (e.g., a Jew in Nazi Germany) demonstrates this quite clearly. Whatever our duty may be to the state, it clearly cannot take precedence over our higher duty to God, which in this case means our duty to witness to a human being's right to life and to a fair trial.

The current problem is that this principle has now been taken up and reinterpreted on the basis of an understanding of love which has no objective reference to the Word of God. Christian love, like the righteousness of the believer, is not a home-grown product but a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not our conception of love which counts, but God's. His love is revealed to us in Christ, and so anything which goes against the teaching of Christ is not love, however it may appear at the human level. The Christian preacher especially must keep the Christocentric quality of love foremost in his mind.

We do not demonstrate love in *imitation* of Christ but in *obedience* to him. It is obedience which leads to resemblance, and thus to true imitation, not self-will.

True love is not possible without spiritual *discernment* and this is another fundamental aspect of the Christian life. We are told that we must test the spirits (1 John 4:1) and this task is more urgent today than ever. It is relatively easy to reject a foreign religion or something which is manifestly evil, like witchcraft, but Christians need to learn that the Devil appears most subtly as an Angel of Light. Discernment in spiritual things is not to be taken for granted; we cannot simply look it up in a book or even refer back to past experience. Each situation has a uniqueness of its own, and here more than anywhere we are driven back to our knees for help. What is right in one case may not be right in another, but only a closer walk with God will enable us to spot the difference and act accordingly. The Christian pastor above all must learn this lesson or die, since discernment is the key to the fruitful exercise of his ministry.

The Christian life demands in addition that we prepare ourselves for *spiritual warfare*. This principle is clearly stated in Ephesians 6:10-19, and it is implicit in many parts of the New Testament. A hundred years ago it was standard fare in Evangelical circles, as hymns like *Stand up, Stand up for Jesus* and organizations like the Salvation Army testify. Yet two world wars and the threat of a nuclear holocaust have had their effect here as elsewhere. Spiritual warfare is now regarded as militaristic and somehow wrong; the new emphasis is all on pacifism and unilateral disarmament. The folly of this policy at the level of the state will only be seen in the long term, but its fatal consequences for the spirit of the believer are apparent every time we look at the Church. Without wishing to fall into the trap of Moral Rearmament, in which ethical absolutes replace a living relationship with God, we must confess that we have been very lax in this respect. The Church today is on the defensive but it is not willing to risk a fight, and so we find ourselves even more dispirited than mere numbers or organization might suggest.

The "old-fashioned" virtues of regular, disciplined prayer and Bible study must be reinvigorated if we are to triumph in the victory of the cross. By this we mean not simply continued, or even extended, but *renewed*. In the last few years there has been a great change in Evangelical circles, not all of which is wrong, but which has produced dangerous side effects whose consequences have still not been properly thought through. Whereas at one time simplistic prayers and naive Bible-reading were standard Evangelical fare, much to the embarrassment of the more sensitive believer, today we are just as likely to be assailed by the results of "scholarship". We may even feel that we can only approach the Word through a commentary, whose opinion we are liable to accept as definitive. Instead of wrestling with the text we are sifting competing interpretations, and all too often losing any sense of practical application which the text might have.

This situation is not all bad; in that it is better to get things right from a commentary than wrong from private inspiration, but the danger is that we may never feel the power of God's Word equipping us for the battle. Indeed, the very concept of struggle with the forces of evil may come to seem unreal if we lock ourselves away in our studies and never emerge. Renewed prayer and Bible study will take what is right from the world of scholarship, but will learn to *apply* it to the business of everyday life.

Spiritual warfare must be resurrected as the norm for the Christian life, both privately and corporately. Privately, because unless we put on the whole armour of God we cannot hope to stand in the evil day. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to warn against campaigning for moralistic legislation and the like, on the ground it was no substitute for revival

and in the end would be self-defeating. He was thinking primarily of "temperance" crusades and sabbatarianism, which before the last war still had a powerful grip on the Evangelical mind. Today that is largely gone, and our generation bears witness to the futility of our fathers' efforts. We have neither protected the interests they sought to defend, nor restored the influence of the Church, which they sought to exert.

Today the issues have changed, but the principle remains the same. Voices are heard calling the Church to abandon personal piety and campaign for political ends, which may be anything from nuclear disarmament to outlawing video nasties. Ecology, abortion and the like find a place in this as well. Yet for all the energy expended and the sympathy aroused, little or nothing happens in actual practice. Why not? The answer, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones warned, is that unless a man is convinced in his own heart that a certain moral standard is God's will, he will lack the motivation to maintain it. Unless the nation as a whole can be convinced that God's Word is the norm by which it should live, attempts to legislate morality are bound to fail — and to discredit those who campaign for it.

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The Christian life is rooted in personal conviction, but it also has a corporate dimension. What is our attitude to those who share in the body of Christ, but in ways which are different from ours? Is it not a scandal that we are not only divided but that we perpetuate division over matters of Church government or the administration of the sacraments, when these things are not clearly set down in Scripture and did not occupy the main energies of the Early Christians?

Can we not exercise charity in non-essentials, and build a common friendship in which sincerely held differences can be respected and not derided or persecuted? The Ecumenical Movement has many faults, not least its minimalist approach to doctrine, but surely it has a lesson for us all. If we are one in the Spirit then our unity should be seen and felt in the world of everyday life, and not just in the artificial atmosphere of interdenominational conferences.

At the same time, it behoves us to take heed of the call to purity in Church life. Many sectarian tendencies spring from this deeply felt need, and they develop when other believers fail to take their responsibilities seriously. The main-line Churches have long since abandoned any concept of discipline, and heresy has come to be regarded as an untenable idea. Yet the Reformers taught that godly discipline was a mark of the true Church, and broke with Rome at least partly because it had been seriously neglected in the Middle Ages. Today their descendants live in Churches which are much worse doctrinally (except on paper) and not infrequently almost as bad morally as anything which they themselves experienced. Yet too often we who know the truth take refuge in legal loopholes and casuistée arguments. As long as we are left alone to do as we please, then we can live with a pluralistic Church in which our deeply-held convictions are openly denied. The idea that our Christian life ought to extend outside the private sphere (and what is said here of the Church is even more true of business and industry) has practically vanished, with the result that the modern Christian is forced to live in two separate worlds which are unconnected with each other. The only answer is for us to follow the command of the New Testament to put on the armour of the Gospel, to learn how to discern the will of God, and to pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to do that will in wisdom and in love.