

# PART FOUR

## THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Having removed some of the lesser stumbling blocks of archaic doctrine, and having seen that to be Christian means to try to live faithfully with Jesus of Nazareth as our compass, we now confront the greater stumbling block of living this way. In Chapter Sixteen we describe briefly some of the themes of a Christian life: self-acceptance; right relationship with God, self and others; and a balance between passion and perspective.

In Chapter Seventeen we consider what it means to live faithfully specifically with reference to possessions and the use of money. We explore the two alternative ways of living faithfully: the radical response and the uncomfortable middle, and we conclude that above all we need to take this question seriously.

In Chapter Eighteen we pursue the question of wealth to a consideration of economic systems. We point out the differences among capitalist systems and among socialist systems, conclude that neither is in itself the problem or the solution, and then look at the challenges confronting our own system of democratic capitalism.

In Chapter Nineteen we conclude with a brief consideration of the new spirituality which we need to encompass the whole of life, and we look at the sacred, worship, prayer, work, and the Church.

And then it is time for us to get to work following the lead of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

## CHAPTER 16: THE STUMBLING BLOCK: LIVING THE FAITH

“We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” (I Corinthians 1:23)

I preach a common sense approach to doctrine. I deny the need to believe in the traditional concepts of original sin, salvation, miracles and the Incarnation. Have I simply thrown out all the difficult parts of Christianity? Does this make Christian faith “reasonable” to our modern society?

No, it does not. In fact, all we have done is to remove a lesser stumbling block precisely *in order that* people can confront the greater one: living the faith.

The lesser stumbling block has been thrust aside by our modern common sense. The greater stumbling block stands intact and confronts our understanding of what is important in life. The distinction between these two is the same as the distinction made between doctrine and faith in Chapter 8. It is the distinction between logic and meaning, between reasoning and values, between head and heart.

The head is concerned with understanding, with making sense of things. Doctrine is the way in which the head explains the heart to other heads. Since we have a modern world-view our doctrine must be consistent with this view. Our theology must be coherent and understandable and reasonable to other heads that share our common sense. Otherwise our explanation becomes a stumbling block in itself.

It is the head’s job to understand and explain, but the head must be given direction by the heart. It is this heart-given direction—or faith—that the head must render understandable. If it doesn’t, then the values and meaning that we live by will not be able to get through the other person’s head to their heart. And what we want is for these values to be confronted by the other person’s heart. We want others to be able to make the all-important choice to live *for* love or *against* love, *towards* God or *away from* God.

But if the challenge to make this choice is put in concepts that cause the other person's head to balk, their heart will never even face this choice. So it is precisely to allow people to confront this greater stumbling block, precisely to enable the heart to confront this all-important choice, that our doctrine must make sense. It would be tragic if the lesser stumbling block to the head prevented the heart's confrontation of the great stumbling block.

So our doctrine must be reasonable. But the great stumbling block *cannot* be made reasonable. The choice for or against Christian faith, the choice of how to live our lives, is not a matter of reasonableness.

This is true for two reasons: first, because this choice is not based on reason, but is based instead on value. And basic value is felt, not reasoned.

Second, because the choice to live towards God and (therefore) away from material success and security, away from selfishness, away from what is easy and popular, will never seem reasonable or even possible to anyone who finds their value in success and security and popularity. Christian faith cannot be made "reasonable" to those who accept the dominant view of our culture. Those who define success in material terms, those who see the goal of life as attaining possessions or status or even happiness, will find the teachings of the Christ to be both folly and a stumbling block. Living for others is clearly *unreasonable* to these people.

But this is the call. This is the great choice we must make with our lives. And this is why it is such a stumbling block: we are not called to think Christianity or to talk it or to believe it, all of which we could do while serving other gods in our daily lives. We are called to *live* it. We are called to live Christianity, for living towards God with Jesus of Nazareth as our guide is what it means to be Christian.

In the next chapter we will look at some specific questions about what it means to live as Christians with regard to possessions and the use of money. In this chapter we will take a broad look at what it means to live this choice by considering the themes of the Christian life.

### Themes of the Christian Life

I will not pretend that I can exhaustively define the Christian life or that a satisfactory description of it can be given in one chapter. Nevertheless, we can usefully point out some characteristics or "themes" which mark the Christian life. I am not going to use "love" as a separate theme, for two reasons. First, because this word is so misused and misunderstood and has such different meanings for different people. And second,

because these other themes can be understood as an elaboration of what Christian love and faith entail.

We will be looking at three clusters of themes: (I) acceptance; (II) right relationship; and (III) perspective and passion.

## I. Acceptance

The message of God's acceptance of us—yes, even you, and yes, even me, imperfect creatures though we are—is central to the Christian message. We in turn need to accept this acceptance, which means also accepting ourselves so that we are then able to accept others. This self-acceptance and other-acceptance find expression as inner strength, gentleness, tolerance, hospitality and other similar attributes.

### Self-Acceptance: Source of Compassion and Strength

So much of what is desirable in a person's character depends on self-acceptance and a sense of worth. This generally grows from a sense of being loved and valued, a feeling that ought to be imparted by every parent to every child. But (may God forgive us!) it isn't, and so it often has to originate from elsewhere. But whether or not it originates early in the family, it needs to be reinforced later from elsewhere. Certainly we will continue to value other people's opinions, but if we are to be mature and responsible adults we must arrive at that point where our own feeling of self-worth is not determined by the opinions of those around us.

I will not claim that there is only one way to arrive at this point. It is possible that different people may travel different routes to becoming comfortable with themselves. But there is one way that is at the very heart of the message of Jesus Christ: the good news that God loves us, just as we are, and that this love is available to us if we only turn to God and accept it.

This doesn't mean that we are perfect the way we are or that we're always right. It doesn't mean that we don't have to change or grow or struggle. What it means is that God loves us in spite of all our imperfections, that we are valued by God as the individuals we are. This is what gives us the strength and the courage so that we *can* struggle and grow. If the God of all creation finds us worthy of love then we can accept ourselves and discover that we are worth improving.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>We have pointed out that much traditional theology maintains that we are not *worthy* of God's love, but receive it in grace (if we believe) only because of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf. This is a perversion of Jesus' message of God's unconditional love that is there for us to turn to and accept.

There are, no doubt, many Christians with a sense of self-worth who do not attribute this to the knowledge that God loves them. We don't go around saying to ourselves, "God loves me, so therefore I'm OK." When I examine my own feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance I attribute them to a variety of factors: family and friends, times of success, times of suffering (which have probably been more important than times of success in this regard), introspection, and simply living through a certain number of years and experiences.

Nevertheless, there is an important element that remains over and apart from all of these that is not dependent on any particular person or event. This is the feeling that I am on good terms with the universe, that I am accepted by and am at peace with that which is, that I belong here and am grounded here in such a way that I can offer hospitality to others.

How do I explain this? I am embarrassed to admit that prior to this I hadn't tried to. But now, as I examine it, I cannot separate this feeling from my faith. To do so would be dishonest. For as near as I can fathom it out, it is based on the knowledge deep inside that I am accepted and valued and loved by that which is in all and through all reality: God.

The self-acceptance which results from this sense of being accepted is what makes it possible for us to be accepting of others in turn. Once our own self-worth is not dependent upon being better than others or on being admired by others or on winning over others in one way or another, then we are able to accept other persons and accept them for who they really are. We are able to offer what Henri Nouwen calls "hospitality": a space in our lives where other people can feel at home, where they are given room to be themselves.<sup>2</sup>

This self-acceptance also provides the inner security and strength that make possible two traits which are often thought of as opposites: gentleness towards others, and strength or steadfastness in conflict.

By "gentleness" I do not mean just refraining from physical violence. There is much more to gentleness than this. It also means a strict avoidance of mental/emotional violence, a healing of wounded psyches, a nurturing of the dreams and abilities and feelings of worth of others. Gentleness is a positive way of showing our love to those all around us. The insecure person is too concerned with justifying their own worth to be able to nurture others in this way.

The secure person can also be gentle in the sense of turning the other cheek, of admitting that the other person might be right, of giving in when only pride (and not principle) is at stake. It takes a strong person to be gentle in this way, a person who depends for their sense of self-worth not on other people but on God. The bully mistakes this gentle-

---

<sup>2</sup>Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (Doubleday and Co., 1975).

ness for weakness, for he or she is a weak person who feels a need to prove precisely what they are so unsure of, and never can prove: their own personal worth. A weak person such as this can't afford to compromise or give in because their personal worth is felt to be at stake. A strong person, secure in their acceptance so that their self-worth is not at stake in the ups and downs of daily life, can afford to yield, compromise, give in.

On the reverse side of this same coin from gentleness is steadfastness and what is sometimes called courage. The person who is secure in their acceptance is much more able to hold to their principles (as opposed to their pride) in the face of the opposition and displeasure of others. Now, this must not be confused with the desperate, irrational clinging to a position by the insecure person who always *has* to be right. It should also be noted that in many (but not all) cases, once a majority decision has been reached it ought to be supported as such. It should further be said that steadfastness is not always easy or painless. But the ability to stand by our principles in conflict and public debate—even when difficult and painful—is an important one, and is more likely if you are comfortable with your acceptance, if your self-worth depends on a power far greater than the squabbling mortals around you.

Recognizing that God loves us and accepting this love, which is to respond affirmatively to the good news of Jesus the Christ, is a central mark or theme of the Christian life. And while on the one hand this self-acceptance is one of the rewards of the Christian life, on the other hand it is the prerequisite for many of the characteristics which we as Christians ought to have in our personal lives: tolerance, gentleness, hospitality, the nurturing of others and inner strength. These traits should be in evidence as we deal with our families, our friends, our colleagues, employees and employers, and our brothers and sisters the other children of God wheresoever we come into contact with them.

## **II. Right Relationship: with Self, with God, with Others**

Regardless of how secure or insecure we may feel, we are called to be in "right relationship", the term which encompasses our second family of themes. This used to be called "righteousness", but this word has been ill-treated in its usage so that it now conjures up images of self-righteousness or indignation or someone striving for saintliness by avoiding the real world.

However, we are called to be "right" not by ourselves, but in relationship to the world. We are called by God to put ourselves in right relation-

ship with ourselves, with God, and with others. This is not a chronological sequence. In fact the three are interdependent and we cannot do any one of them without the other two.

#### **IIA. Right Relationship with Self: Integrity**

If we are not in right relationship with our self we cannot put ourself in right relationship with anyone else. Right relationship with our self is best described as integrity.

Integrity means a consistency of principles and a wholeness of self. This works out best if we—like Jesus—have a moral code that is not a rigid set of rules but rather one that consists of a few basic principles that allow us to work out the best expression of love in each situation.

Integrity means that the principles and values that are a part of our self are not for sale. Humans are tempted to sell out for monetary gain, for employment opportunities or other personal advancement, for popularity, in order to avoid conflict, in awe of authority, or out of ambition or insecurity or greed or lust or fear, and so on through the whole range of selfish human desires and motivations. Integrity means being true to ourselves and our commitments in the face of all of these, which in turn requires that we be honest with ourselves about what we are doing and why.

All too often, of course, our choices are not this simple. Sometimes we have to choose between commitments. For instance, we may have to choose between a commitment not to work for an employer who produces products which we consider to be unsafe, and a commitment to provide for our family. And on the one hand we find it hard to condemn someone who refuses to place their personal purity above the well-being of their loved ones, but on the other hand we must ask whether there are not more important things to give our families than material well-being, things such as spiritual values and integrity.

But the fact remains that many times our choices are not between two commitments or principles but between a principle and a desire. Desires are normal, of course. It is only human to have them. And desires can be noble and altruistic, but they can also be selfish and base. And they can be very strong.

If we are able to be honest with ourselves—a very helpful if not exceedingly popular habit—then we should be able to discern which of our desires are selfish, which are contrary to our own principles. Integrity means being true to these principles that we have made our own and not denying our own self for some other thing that we want. It means not acting or speaking in a way we don't believe is right, not for popularity with peers or for success on the job or for acceptance by a church.

Integrity does not require being loud or pretentious or obnoxious about this. It doesn't mean being proud or hard to get along with. It just means being true to yourself, which you can do as gently as possible and