

A Call to the Christian Life

2 Corinthians 3:18

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We are seeking an answer to the question, What Is the Christian Church? We have said that it is a movement within the church—a plea to the church—a voice calling out to God’s people. It is a call to Christian unity. It is a call to reform and renew the church. It is a call for unity and renewal for the sake of mission. Today I come to add a fourth dimension to our thought—the Christian church is a call to live the Christian life. That is most certainly a word we all need to sound and to hear in these perilous and difficult days. Singularly unique indeed is the family that does not suffer the burden and the hurt of some kind of moral failure. Those that have not suffered such failure, generally have plenty of pride at not having done so.

In the Christian church we have stressed doctrine, emphasized the ordinances, and given significant attention to polity (and rightfully so). But there has always been a need to call for the living of the Christian life. Sometimes our doctrinal correctness has not been matched by our moral life. So many of us are like Augustine more than 1600 years ago when he prayed, “Lord, make me pure, but not yet.” These are the days that tempt us to put cleverness above goodness, success before sincerity, and achievement in front of integrity. The confusion of our time appears in the story of a young woman at a banquet that turned to her friend and said, “Dr. So & So is here and he is such a great man; he speaks eight languages.” Her friend wisely answered, “Yes, he is a great man, but not because he speaks eight languages. He could be a liar in all eight.”

How to live a Christian life is often sadly misunderstood. The minds of people are filled with all kinds of inadequate ideas about how to live the good life.

One such idea is the self-sufficient approach—by sheer will power I can force myself to be good. Preachers often encourage such an attitude with sermons full of "oughts" and "shoulds" and "musts". As if a person can roll up ones sleeves, spit on ones hands and achieve the Christian ideal. Nothing can be more false and disappointing. Mere spasms of earnestness furnish no moral achievement. If a ship stalls in mid-ocean five hundred able-bodied sailors may go on deck and push against the mast all to no avail. A drowning man cannot lift himself out of the water by pulling at the hair of his own head. Jesus said, “Which of you by taking thought can add a cubit to his stature?” Will power alone is not enough. Many have experienced failure on that road.

Another inadequate approach to the Christian life is that of a humorless self-denial. Some feel that if anything has even the appearance of fun it is wrong. A terrible sleet storm happened one Saturday night and knocked-out all communications. The young minister had great difficulty getting to his church on Sunday morning. Travel was so

hazardous that he finally put on ice skates and skated down the solidly frozen river to his church. Some of the families who lived nearby made it to church but they were bothered by the young minister skating on Sunday. Unable to decide, they finally called a meeting following church and asked him if he enjoyed skating down the river. The good life can never be built only on those things we are against. Negatives alone cannot produce goodness. Contrast this attitude with Jesus “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11RSV). Such ideas are perfectly human, perfectly natural and perfectly inadequate.

As we face our time of moral decline some say we need less stress on religion and more emphasis on morality. We all need to be aware of Lord Devlin’s reminder: “No society has yet solved the problem of how to teach morality without religion.” Paul Ramsey began his great book on Basic Christian Ethics with these words: “The first thing to be said concerning Christian ethics is that it cannot be separated from its religious foundations.” P.T. Forsyth wrote many years ago: “If conduct is wrong, it is the religion that needs reforming; the life will follow the faith” (*The Cruciality of the Cross*, 27). Luther once said: “It is not good works which make a good man, but a good man who does good works.” Let me try to spell out something of what this means. Allow me to present a brief biblical theology of the Christian life—set forth the conditions for living a Christian life.

The Christian Life Is A Life Based On Faith. We have just passed through a time in which the prevailing theology made the fatal mistake of separating morals from faith. The contention was that faith mattered little; it was life that counted. A more thoughtful theology now says the Christian life is based on Christian faith. One is the root; the other is the fruit. There can be no Christian life without Christian faith. “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6). “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). Doctrine and practice, creed and conduct, knowledge and action are all related to one another as foundation to super-structure and center to circumference. There is no true morality, which does not spring from faith; and there is no true faith, which does not issue in morality. Christian faith is not magical, nor mystical, but moral.

Faith is the total response of the whole person to the action of the grace of God in our behalf through Jesus Christ. Alan Richardson states it clearly: “Faith therefore involves personal decision, trust, commitment and obedience; it is a wholehearted acceptance of the claim of God upon a man, (person), in the situation in which he (that person) exists, with the appropriate response in life and action.” (*An Introduction To The Theology of The New Testament*, 30). Faith is intellectual, emotional and volitional. There is a dimension of faith, which we especially need to emphasize today.

John G. Paton carried the Gospel to the New Hebrides Islands. Like every good missionary he knew that the Bible must be given to the people in their own language. He was working on a translation of John 3:16, but could find no word in their language for “believe.” One day an old man came in from the field where he had been laboring all morning and sat down heavily on an old chair. As he did so, he used a word, which said,

“I am casting my whole weight on this chair.” Seizing that clue, Paton translated John 3:16 to say, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever casts his whole weight on Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” That is a dimension of faith we need to emphasize in a special way today. Casting our whole weight on the Lord is something we all need to do. That commitment must come before we can ever hope to live the Christian life. The Christian life is a life based on faith. Trust God! Believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord! Yield up your life in obedient trust! Become a Christian!

The Christian Life is a Life Lived by the Power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the divine dynamic of the new life. The Holy Spirit is God in the present tense—God present and active in the life of his church and the lives of his people. William Barclay says, “The Spirit stands for the fact that it is neither possible to lose God in trouble nor to escape God in sin.” A. M. Hunter says, “The Spirit is God in Christ at work in men (us) helping, inspiring, quickening, sanctifying.” The Christian life is a life lived by supernatural power. Human methods are not enough. Human effort is not enough. Madison Avenue techniques may make a lot of noise for awhile, but God’s victories must be won by God’s power.

All through the New Testament the Holy Spirit is inseparably associated with power. At Caesarea, Peter preached Jesus Christ “with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38). Paul writes to the Corinthians that his preaching was “not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the spirit and power” (I Cor.2:4). To Timothy, Paul writes, “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-control” (II Tim.1:17). The concerted testimony of the New Testament scriptures is that the Holy Spirit is the source of power for living the Christian life.

In spite of all the power available many today are powerless. Robert Raines has written: “The church is loaded with nominal members—genial, friendly folk who are ignorant of the Bible and innocent of disciplined Christian commitment. They are sincerely but superficially Christian. The order of Christianity is drawn pastel. Its faith is shallow: its people are without any spiritual history; they are not growing, they are spiritually asleep.”

Several years ago a Chinese gentleman came to this country, went to Detroit and bought himself a new Ford car. He had it shipped back to China. But being afraid to turn on the engine, he hired four coolies to push him wherever he desired to go. That reminds me of a lot of Christians I know—folk who are powerless because they have not allowed the power of the Holy Spirit into their lives. Without the Holy Spirit we are powerless.

That brings us to a most practical consideration—one that has helped me a great deal personally. How does a Christian tap into the power of the Holy Spirit and make him available for Christian living? The answer was given clearly by a young English minister who died while still a young man—his name was Leslie J. Tizard:

“If we ask how such a power can ever be ours the answer is that there is nothing to do but receive it. It does not come by striving for it. It comes when we cease to strive. It surges in when we open our lives to it. There is nothing to be done on our part but to remove the barrier of mistrust and quietly wait for it. Paul gives us to understand...that the immense energies of the religious life are rooted in a moment of passivity in which God acts (“Power For Christian Living” in *My Way of Preaching*, p. 175).

The power for living the Christian life is available to all of us when we are baptized. The Holy Spirit is not given to a select few but to all of God’s people. Through Joel God had promised, “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17). It is appropriated when we learn to trust—when we pass from trying to trusting, from battling to blending, from striving to surrendering. The Christian life is a life based on faith and lived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian Life Is A Life Lived Within the Fellowship of the Church. That immediately raises an old but important question – Can I not serve God just as well outside the church as I can inside? Is not Christianity a personal matter between God and me? Many, many people would answer “yes” to both these questions because they feel a person’s relation to the church is a matter of convenience and of secondary importance. You become a Christian and then you “join” the church of your choice. Personal conversion, personal devotional life, personal integrity—these are the essentials. Being a Christian is strictly a personal matter. You do not need to be a member of the Church to be a Christian.

Why do people feel this way? What has contributed to this attitude in so many people? Two things, I think: First, in part it reflects the culture of freedom and rugged individualism which our national history has fostered; Second, in part it rests upon the sound evangelical observation that personal decision and personal responsibility are essential to being a Christian.

What this individualistic view overlooks is that while we become Christians personally, we do not become Christians privately. The same thing, which makes us a Christian, makes us a part of the people of God—the church. You don’t become a Christian and then “join” some church. When you are born into the Kingdom of God you thereby become a member of the people of God. Personal Christian faith is necessary. But such faith must be fostered, developed, and exercised within the Christian community—the church. There is a sense in which the old adage is true—“outside the church there is not salvation.” Robert McAfee Brown speaks clearly to this point when he says: “It is clear that from the very first Christian faith was community, rather than just the faith of scattered individuals. For example, in almost every place that the phrase ‘in Christ’ occurs in Paul’s letters, it means ‘in the Christian community.’ It does not stand for a private kind of mysticism. To be ‘in Christ’ is to be ‘in the church’. The term ‘individual Christianity’ cancels itself out. Anyone who takes Christianity seriously is forced to take the church seriously.”(*The Significance of the Church*, p. 17).

In order that we might see this view biblically, let me sketch quickly the place of the church in the book of Ephesians. The theme of Ephesians is the glory of the church as the society, which embodies in history the eternal purpose of God made plain in Jesus Christ. There are three central ideas here: (1) God's great eternal purpose to heal the rift created by our rebellious disobedience and to unite all things in Christ; (2) Jesus Christ is the agent of this reconciliation; (3) The church is the instrument through which God's purpose is to be realized in the world. God intended the church. Christ died for the church, and it is within the church that the Christian life is to be lived.

There are many criticisms of the church these days—and most of them are deserved. The church is tragically divided, ineffective, irrelevant, and often uncommitted. In many areas of the world it is losing the battle for the minds and hearts of men and women. An old medieval statement said it well: "The church is like Noah's ark; if it weren't for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the smell inside." Nevertheless, there is a storm outside and the church is God's instrument of mission and service to the world. What we need is not the de-churching of Christianity, but the Christianizing of the church. The Christian life is to be lived within the sphere of the church.

But even that needs to be spelled out more clearly. The Christian life is to be lived within the fellowship of the church—in relationship with God and the people of God. There is a common participation, a togetherness, a sharing necessary to a Christian life. We simply cannot be a Christian by ourselves. Yet there is something within us that makes us try to be self-sufficient. During the war years, the New York Times carried the rather startling statement. "Last night Miss Bessie Smith whistled the Fifth Symphony." Bessie was undoubtedly quite a whistler, but she didn't whistle the Fifth Symphony—that requires a full orchestra. The Christian life is not a solo performance—it is to be lived in fellowship. We are necessary to each other. Our differences and diversities can serve to enrich one another.

Dr. William Robinson provides a vivid example of the dynamic nature of Christian fellowship when he comments on Jesus' choice of the twelve: "He was making a bid for fellowship with this heterogeneous group, made up of a collaborator' and an extreme nationalist, together with one who approximated to an anarchist; of fishermen of the well-to-do owner class and of the working class; of a scientific-minded unbeliever like Thomas and a guileless innocent like Nathanael. Here was the church in embryo, and it was a typical church at that. This is what fellowship means, not the gathering together of a group of like-minded uninteresting people calculated to bore anyone other than themselves, but the non-explosive interlocking of those rich differences of personality which, if left to themselves or organized on a class basis, would lead to endless strife" (*Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, pp. 42,43). Christ subdues and subordinates our differences to blend them into a richer and more profound fellowship.

Yet, something within so many makes us pretend to be sufficient within ourselves and seek to go it alone. Daniel Boone saw new settlers passing near his isolated cabin in the backwoods of Kentucky. He asked the travelers where they were living and they said

about seventy miles away. Boone turned to his wife and said, “Old woman, we must move; they are crowding us.” In the church there are always those who don’t want to be crowded—who refuse fellowship. To all that have such an independent spirit, a complete mature Christian life is impossible.

Randolph Cramp Miller, a fine Christian educator of the past generation, explains why those who refuse fellowship can never be fully mature Christians: “Christian character develops within the fellowship. When we are loyal to God, who works within the fellowship and at the same time stands over it, we have a framework for our loyalty that transcends the immediate cultural situations. Our beliefs guide our actions, and our membership in the group is the channel of grace whereby we are able to approximate God’s will for us through our vocation. Ethical behavior is our thanksgiving for God’s grace to us through Christ, and by the power of the Spirit we are enabled to fight under God’s banner and to continue Christ’s faithful servant” (*Christian Nurture and The Church*, p.195). In Christ we learn to put up with each other, we tolerate one another. We differ but we stay together. We need each other. My Christian life is dependent on you and the fellowship we have together. Little wonder that when our faith is weak and inadequate and misplaced; when we are not filled, empowered with the Holy Spirit; when we are loners and alienated from the fellowship of the body of Christ—is it any wonder that our Christian life is inadequate, unfulfilling, lacking joy, and falling far short of the maturity.

Keeping all of that in mind, we come to take a brief look at our text. Sometimes we preach *from* a text, but in this case we have preached our way *up to* the text. Listen: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (II Cor. 3:18). That is God’s formula, God’s recipe for sanctification—for growth in Christlikeness. Does corn grow by pattern and character by caprice? Of course not. As Henry Drummond wrote—“If this simple rule be but followed fearlessly, it will yield the result of a perfect character as surely as any result that is guaranteed by the laws of nature.” He was referring to our text.

As we live by faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit, within the living fellowship of the church, slowly, imperceptibly we are gradually changed into the image of our Lord. It is not by will power, not by trying harder, but in relationship—in fellowship. The change is not ours, but Gods—note the passive voice, “are being transformed.” God adds a little here, takes away a little there; changes an attitude here gives an encouragement there and gradually we are transformed into his image. That is the way we live the Christian life.

Now check yourself! Does your faith motivate and move all of your life? Is it soundly rooted in the person of Jesus? Are you filled and empowered by the blessed Holy Spirit? Are you in the vibrant living fellowship of the church? Do you go to church or are you a part of the church? When you answer those questions you will have analyzed your own Christian life. The Christian life—the life in Christ—is a life based on faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and lived in the fellowship of the church.

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