

## The Christian Life

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### Life In The Church

It is not uncommon that we so accentuate our American individualism that we fall into the trap of thinking the Christian life is simply an individual endeavor and can be quite easily pursued in utter independence of the life of the church. But this is not the way the New Testament talks about the faithful life: faith requires the support of the community of the faithful, rather than the lonely and isolated journey of the singular individual. We need other persons to teach us, to mentor us, to worship with us, to pray with us, to converse with us, to practice with us, to love with us, if we are to grow in faithfulness.

While the church is always at least a group of folk who have some institutional relations, **the church is primarily a community of persons called into life by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** The New Testament refers to this community as a *koinonia* of persons in liberative and redemptive fellowship with each other and with God. We need to keep our focus on the church as a distinctive sort of community with a distinctive way of life and mission in the world.

In contemporary Disciples theological reflection we are developing a new way of describing the nature and mission of the church. The emphasis is on the church as a community constituted by its distinctive **discourses and practices.** Under the word 'discourses' we include the wide array of linguistic expressions of the faith in the life of the church: we pray, we sing, we read Scripture, we preach and hear sermons and lessons, we confess our sins, and much more. It is in these discourses, when they are functioning well and truthfully, that we identify who God is, characterize the human situation before God, and characterize the way Christians are called to live in the world. Persons come to faith by encountering these discourses, and it is in the use of these Christian concepts, images, and stories that faith comes to have content and character. And when these discourses, in given communities of the church, are in disarray or confusion or said empty, then it becomes difficult for the Christian life to take decisive shape in the hearts of the people.

Under the word 'practices' we are simply pointing out that the discourses, as actions of speaking, are themselves practices of faith, and that such speaking shapes the practices of worshipping and living that are essential to Christian life. We learn in the church how to speak the language of faith, how to practice faithful speech, and how to put faithful speech into action in our relations with others, with God, and with the world. The Christian life is something definite and authentic only in its concrete practices.

Hence, Christian living requires that the individual be in the community of faithful discourses and practices that aim at forming her life in relation to herself, in relation to others in the church and in the world, and in relation to God. None of us can teach that to ourselves by ourselves: we require the church as the community of distinctive discourses and practices in which we can **learn how to be faithful.**

It is in the church that we learn how to be grateful for God's grace in Jesus Christ, learn the depth and content of that grace, learn how to become lovers of Christ who are empowered to love the world in a new

way, and learn how to become witnesses to the triune God for the benefit of the world. Persons do not become Christians by accident of birth or ethnicity or nationality. They become Christians through their own authentic appropriation of the discourses and practices of the church of Jesus Christ.

## **Life In The Spirit**

We are discussing the shape of the Christian life. In the previous article I talked about the Christian life as life in the church. It is in the church, as that community of persons called into life by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that we encounter the discourses and practices that shape us into conformity to God's triune life.

Now we are going to talk about the Christian life as life in the Spirit. It is everywhere evident in the New Testament that the disciples of Jesus Christ who say 'yes' to his life, death, and resurrection as God's gracious good news of new life, are empowered to say 'yes' by the Holy Spirit. Indeed we can say that it is the **Holy Spirit that is the foundational dynamism of the Christian life.**

The Holy Spirit is variously named "the Spirit of your Father" [Mt 10.20], "the Spirit of his Son" [Gal 4.6], "the Spirit of Jesus" [Acts 16.7], "the Spirit of Christ" [Rom 8.9; Phil 1.19; 1 Pet 1.11], "the Spirit of life" [Rom 8.2], "the Spirit of grace" [Heb 10.29], and "Spirit of truth" [Jn 14.17] and many times simply as "Holy Spirit". To live in Christ is to live in and by the Spirit of Christ, which is none other than the Spirit of the Father who is the God of Israel and the Creator of all things.

It is the Spirit that comes upon, descends upon, is poured out on persons and the church; that speaks to and through persons, teaches and reveals to persons in witness to Christ and the Father; that dwells within persons; that sanctifies persons; that intercedes in prayer; that gives wondrous gifts. Among these **gifts of the Spirit** are **new life** [Jn 6.63; Rom 7.6; 8.11; 1 Cor 3.6], **freedom from sin** [Rom 8.2; 2 Cor 3.17], **living, speaking, and doing the truth** [Jn 4.24; 14.17], **the creating, building up and giving unity to the church** [Acts 2; 1 Cor 12.1-13; 14.12; 2 Cor 13.13; Eph 4.3-4; 1 Pet 3.8], and **bestowing of the wonderful fruits of Christian living** [Gal 5.22: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness"].

There is no aspect of the life of the individual Christian and the church that does not seem to be empowered and shaped by the Holy Spirit. Hence, we can say that the Spirit is that power graciously given to persons that **works within their lives to shape and form them in conformity to God's triune life** as the One who creates and governs all things, as the One who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, and as the One who moves within creatures to bring new life.

It is because we say these words so meaningfully and responsibly that the church has from its foundations been set on a trinitarian trajectory. We acknowledge the Spirit as the Spirit of the Creator and the Reconciler when we confess God's trinitarian life with us and for us. This confession also reminds us that the Holy Spirit is never the possession of individual persons or the church but is the One who freely and lovingly possesses persons and the church.

Hence, there is never any opposition between life in the Spirit and life in Christ. Life in the Spirit is tested by its having the 'mind of Christ' [1 Cor 2.14-16]. To live in Christ and become his disciple in witness to God's love for the world is precisely to live in and by the Spirit.

Persons who live in the Spirit pray for God's continuing guidance and are bold to believe that the Spirit will be their counselor through the trials and joys of life. But living in the Spirit is living in the community of church where the discourses about and in the Spirit are uttered and learned and where the practices of worship, of education, of love, and of outreach to the world are cultivated regularly. The Spirit promises to empower and to **dwelt within** those discourses and practices when they are faithfully performed and lived. Come Holy Spirit, come!

## **Life In Faith**

Now we are going to look at the Christian life through the lens of understanding it as life-in-faith.

We should not expect to arrive a simple definition of the term 'faith'. In the New Testament the term '*pistis*' and its derivatives are variously translated 'faith', 'belief', 'believing', 'having faith'. To capture these biblical senses, some theologians have invented the word 'faithing', comparable to 'believing'. But we can save ourselves some confusions about meanings if we admit up front that 'faith' [and *pistis*] is a term that has a family of uses that are interconnected but not reducible to a simple definition.

We can also learn from church tradition to identify some of the uses that centrally comprise the family of meanings that describe the Christian life as life-in-faith. In general we can say that 'faith' can refer both to the whole of the Christian life and to some particular aspects of that life.

First, let us consider 'faith' as used to refer to the whole of the Christian life as an orientation to God: the life of saying 'yes' to what God has done in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. In this sense, faith is a whole **way of life** or **form of life** that is given its shape by God's self-revealing life. It is the orientation of the whole person's heart, mind, and will on God's saving life.

As such, faith involves distinctive beliefs, actions, and passions. Faith is the comprehensive **how** of the person's life: how one lives before God's abundant grace and under the summons of God's command to witness and to love. In this connection, faith is a matter of **being faithful** to God and to the life God has summoned us to live.

Second, faith, both as the basic orientation of the Christian and as particular aspects of that orientation, is always to be thought of as a **gift** of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor 12.9; Eph 2.8]. God's gift evokes gratitude to God and worshipful praise for God's loving grace in Jesus Christ. Therefore, faith is never to be thought of as a human achievement about which boasting might be appropriate. With this combination of thankfulness and worship, we can say that faith is **doxological gratitude** to God.

Third, faith obviously involves some aspects of what we ordinarily call '**belief**'. Faith involves believing something about God, believing that God is characterized in some definite ways. In particular it focuses on God's being characterized by the life of Jesus Christ. So, faith is always at least belief that God is characterized as the Almighty Creator of all things, as the Reconciling Lover in Jesus Christ, and as the Redeeming Spirit. Indeed there are many distinctive Christian beliefs about God, about humanity, and about the world.

But, fourth, faith is not belief in any easy or superficial sense. This is clear when we consider that it is impossible to have Christian faith, in the sense of believing a statement about God to be true, in any neutral fashion. When we believe that God is the One we know in Jesus Christ, we are also **having faith in God**. We are **trusting in God**; we are staking our life on God. This personal trust in God keeps faith from ever being understood as mere belief that some statement is true of God.

Thus, we can see how **faith as belief that** and **faith as trust in** are mutually interrelated and never to be separated or opposed. We cannot trust in God if there is not some belief as to who God is, and we cannot truly believe something about God without trusting in God. Christians do not trust in an unknown cipher presumably at the depths of things.

Fifth, putting belief and trust together helps us understand how faith can be seen as a **personal knowing of God**. In faith we encounter God with belief and trust, with a consuming passion for the life of God and for the life God has called us to live. In faith we meet God as gracious and holy friend.

So, the Christian life is life-in-faith to the extent we believe God's self-revealing declarations to us in Israel and in Jesus Christ through the Spirit and to the extent that we trust the whole of our life to God.

To recapitulate, it is in the church that we hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and are called to live in the Spirit of Christ. This living-in-the-Spirit is living-in-faith: believing that God is as the Gospel of Jesus Christ says God is, and trusting in God with the whole of our life.

### **Life in the Works and Passions of Love-1**

We are looking at the various ways in which the Christian life is refracted for us as life-in-the-church, life-in-the-Spirit, and life-in-faith. Now we will consider how the Christian life is life in the **works and passions of love**.

The word 'love', of course, has many uses in English, and we will have to think diligently in order to sort out the distinctive Christian understanding of love. We know we are into difficulty when we recognize that in ordinary language love can refer to a **feeling** or to an **action** or to a **relationship**. How does Christian theology tie these concerns together? And what are we to make of people who say that Christian love for another is not something that can be commanded or made obligatory but is something that arises spontaneously from the affections?

Well, the New Testament should help us here. If anything is clear, it is that Jesus and the New Testament authors regularly adopt the Hebraic form of **divine command** when speaking of love:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and...you shall love your neighbor as yourself." [Mt 22.37-39; Mk 12.31-33; Lk 10.27]

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [Mt 19.19; Rom 13.9, Gal 5.14; Jas 2.8]

"But I say to you...love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." [Lk 6.27, 35; Mt 5.43-44]

These compelling passages don't say: 'wait to love until you feel like it' or 'love when it arises spontaneously in your heart' or 'love is such a precious internal feeling that it could never be commanded.' Rather, love of God and of neighbor is commanded by God, and therefore the Christian has an **obligation to love God and neighbor**.

Yet it is true that the love commandments do not just emerge from nowhere. They emerge from an encounter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ: that God loves human beings and summons them to a life of love. Hence, Christians are **motivated and empowered** to love by God's prior love for humanity. **In Jesus Christ God teaches us how to love**. [See Jn 3.16; 13.34; 15.9; Rom 5.8; Gal 2.20; Eph 5.1-2; 1 Jn 3.16; 4.9-11,19; Rev 1.5] And this love becomes love in our hearts and minds and wills under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. [Rom 5.5]

As God in Jesus Christ has been self-giving and compassionate with the world of humans, so too we are called to give of ourselves in relation to the neighbor. But an extraordinary stretching of meaning is taking place in the life of Jesus: **the neighbor is not just persons from the neighborhood but now includes the enemy**. Since God's love is indiscriminate and given to all, so too the Christian's love is summoned to be indiscriminate, excluding no one. No person falls outside that group of those whom Christians are commanded to love.

What then does it mean to love **indiscriminately** all persons? It means at least that we are not called to love only those for whom we already have some familial and friendly feelings and relationships. We are commanded to love the enemy, and this at least means that we are to regard the enemy's life as of the same value as our own. The enemy's life is not expendable in the hands of Christian love.

In relation to the neighbor, then, we are to perform the **works of love on his or her behalf**. That is, we are to love the neighbor **for her own sake**, and not for the sake of some larger cause or for our own sake. We are to engage in those actions that build-up the neighbor in his life situation and promotes his good before God.

Because love involves works on behalf of others, we can never reduce Christian love merely to having private affectionate feelings towards others. The measure of our love for another is the good we have done for her.

In our next discussion we will look at how love for self might be Christianly construed and how love does involve profound passions, even though they are not the passions that arise from worldly 'loves'.

## **Life in the Works and Passions of Love-2**

In our last article we discussed the sense in which love, Christianly understood, is commanded by God in Jesus Christ. This love that is commanded is empowered by God's prior love for us in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. And this love involves doing works for the good of the universal neighbor, including our enemies. The Greek term in the New Testament for this love is **agape**.

If we keep our eyes clearly focused, we can learn more about this agape love by contrasting it to another

Greek term for love, *eros*. In general, eros, or what I call **erosic love**, involves our being **attracted** to some person or object. This enormous power of attraction is crucial to human life and lies at the root of most of our desires. Insofar as we are attracted to the object of love, then, we desire some form of union with or possession of the object.

Think of how erosic love 'befalls' us when we are romantically smitten by and attracted to another person. The pull toward the person is powerful, and it disposes us to have all sorts of feelings and to engage in sometimes strange actions. Often the feelings and emotions of erosic love simply overwhelm us.

But there are myriad of ways in which erosic love affects us and a myriad of objects that can be attractive to us. We can be attracted to persons whom we call 'friends', attracted to family members, attracted to heroes and heroines, attracted to some future goal, such as becoming a first rate musician, etc. Common to all these 'loves' is the given fact that they are **preferential** to the individual lover. That is, our erosic loves express our preferences. And obviously, contrarily, there are many persons and objects for which we have no preferential love. Indeed, there are many persons that are repulsive to us.

Erosic love in its many forms is important for human life, and in itself is not bad. But it is not *agape* love. Rather, *agape* love is commanded by God and therefore has a normative structure built in to it: we are to seek the good of the neighbor, regardless of whether we find the neighbor attractive and a preferential object of our desires and passions. *Eros*, being geared to the preferential and attractive, does not have such a normative structure inherent in it. We can erosically love another without having regard for the other's good as an end in herself. In contrast, ***agape* love does not command us to find the other preferentially attractive, but it does command us to see to the well-being of the other.**

Yet, *agape* love is not without feelings and passions. We are commanded to love one another with all our **heart**, which means we are to have a passion for the good of another, even if that other is not particularly attractive to us---even if the other is repulsive and threatening to us! This passion, which is a feeling of concern, means that we have compassionate openness to the other, that we feel the other's situation and are affected by the other's pain, plight, struggle, joy, and happiness.

Yet what about the command to love the neighbor **as yourself**? Does this imply that we all love ourselves in a good fashion and can therefore imitate this in loving the other? I suspect not. We are confronted with the unavoidable biblical recognition and contemporary insight that persons typically do not know how to love themselves in the *agape* sense. In an age of rampant narcissism, we confront the paradox of the narcissist: utter self-absorption coupled with self-loathing.

Hence, there is, Christianly understood, an **illicit self-love** and an **illicit self-contempt**, both of which are to be overcome. Illicit self-love happens when we make ourselves and our desires the center of the universe and all things are judge in relation to 'myself'. Illicit self-contempt happens when we have utter disgust and disregard of ourselves and consider ourselves of no value to anyone or to God.

*Agape* love intends the overcoming of both of these demonic possessions so common in our world. In Jesus Christ we learn that we are loved and valued by God and that God has an eternal destiny in store for us. In learning of God's love for us, we are empowered to love ourselves for the first time in a legitimate and nonselfish way. And we are thereby empowered to love the neighbor and the enemy.

Christians who know God's love for themselves do not have to find their value at someone else's expense, and they don't have to loath themselves. Oddly enough, at the heart of Christian faith is knowing oneself to be a sinner who regularly engages in illicit self-love and illicit self-contempt, and yet it is also a knowing oneself as **forgiven and loved by God**. To know this, is to be empowered to love oneself as one is loved by God. To know this, is to have a redemptive joy and hope.

### **Life in Hope**

We have basically determined that the Christian life is life-in-the-church and life-in-the-Spirit. As such life, we have also determined that it is life-in-faith and life-in-love. It should now be no surprise that we will conclude our discussion by describing the Christian life as life-in-hope.

Hope, of course, has to do with our **orientation to the future**. We hope for possibilities in the future, and such hoping is in general essential to human life. Persons who have no hope are persons in despair about the future: they perceive the future as uninviting or threatening or utterly indifferent to them. Such hopelessness is devastating to human well-being.

But the Christian faces the future as that which is in all respects under the sovereign rule of the God they know in Jesus Christ. While there may be many other questions about how the future will affect us, the Christian is sure of one fundamental belief: **there is no future that can separate them from the love of God they know in Christ Jesus**.

Paul says this powerfully in Romans 8.32-35,37-39:

"If God is for us, who is against us? ...It is Christ Jesus...who intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...No, in all these things...I am convinced that neither death, nor life,...nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Could any of us have made a more comprehensive list of the sort of things that might threaten our future? No, Paul's list covers it all, and apparently Paul thinks any of these threatening events might happen to the Christian, without thereby catapulting the Christian into thinking he or she is being forsaken by God. Rather Paul believes that even if these realities do happen to us, not one of them will be able to separate us from the love of God. Here is the point: **these terrible realities may indeed happen to us in our present and future, but it is the love of God that is the most important thing in the life and future of the Christian**.

Hence, Christians face the future as the time in which they will meet the love of God, come what may. So, Christians do not have the pollyannish hope that everything in their life will be a blessing and beyond harm's way; rather, they have a sober realism that all sorts of difficult threats might happen. But they **trust in God's sovereign love** and therefore they have **hope in God about the future**.

To live with this kind of hope is, therefore, to have a compelling **freedom** about how one lives. We can

give up all those fears that seem to define us daily and to threaten our perceived well-being. **We can be free from those fears that enslave us.**

Consider death: most of us live in utter fear of death as the worse threat we can imagine. Hence, we hope continually to avoid or postpone death, and we are enslaved by that fear. Scripture is clear that we will all die, but it is possible to face the future with the following belief and hopefulness expressed by Paul: "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." [Rom 14.8]

We are free from the power of death over our lives because we hope in the Lord as the One who resurrects the dead and confers new life. The Christian hope in the **resurrection of the dead** affirms that in whatever future in life and death we will finally meet and be embraced by the eternal love of God. Death is not a power that can finally hold and determine us.

Because our hope is finally in God, the Christian can live sprightly into the future as the time over which the triune God reigns. The principalities and powers of the world may appear to have the power to determine our future and the meaning of our life, but we Christians believe that in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has given us a future not under the control of other powers.

This future for the Christian is also a future for all our brothers and sisters in the world. They too, whether they know or not, are caught up in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we Christians abide in the hope that ultimately they will know the grace and love of God.

Hence, **Christians are those folk who hope in the ultimate triumph of God's grace as the triune Ultimate Companion of all humans and of the whole creation.** That sums up the Christian life as that grateful and faithful life made possible by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in the community of the saints in the church; this life is altogether life in hope that is free to love the neighbor and the enemy.