

## A NEW YEAR TO BE NEW IN

We all have thoughts about the coming year, and possibly thoughts of how the last one went, and how fast it went. Wonderful things have happened in our lives, and some not so wonderful things too. Many of us feel a low-grade guilt that we live in such a wonderful country, and in such a lovely and privileged area. We try to think that we deserve our blessings, yet recognize that a huge percentage of the population of our world has never had a chance at such privilege and abundance. Sometimes we would like to be Hindu, so we could believe that where we are born and what we are born into are all a matter of karma, and we deserve our good fortune from merit in past lives – and that the poor are only getting what they deserve, and so we don't have to feel so sorry for them. But we are not Hindu. And to make it worse, there are always jealousy and resentment from some of those who have less toward those who have more. If we wonder about that, we have only to think of our own propensity toward jealousy and resentment, for there are always those who have more than we do, and we don't always think that they are more gifted or brilliant or deserving than others we know, including ourselves.

So, am I leading up to a sermon about the sources of terrorism? We could easily go there, but it yields insights that change nothing. Am I leading up to a rousing call to social action – the Christian responsibility of the rich to give more and more to the poor? Some of you keep wishing I would. By the way, that is the “liberal Christian” version of a “hellfire and brimstone” sermon. The old conservative preachers tried to scare the sin out of people with images of the burning fires of Hell – and who's to say it did no good? The liberal preachers tried to scare the individualism out of people with images of how much they had to give to worthy causes if they were to qualify as really truly Christians – and who's to say it did no good?

Well, both have done a lot of harm too. Only one kind of fear is a helpful foundation for the Christian Life – fear of the Lord – and that's a different sort of fear altogether. Fear of the fires of punishment and Hell only drives us away from trust in the love of God, and away from our own true identity and purposes. Even at best, fear of Hell only drives us deeper into the LAW, and deeper into anger and judgment against those who do not keep the LAW. Inevitably, if secretly, it rebounds on us, and steals our love and compassion.

And yes, there are wondrous acts and sacrifices of love that *do* change people's lives. If we never engage in them, we are very far indeed from the Christian Life. But the programs and approaches of the liberal church to save and solve the world's problems have done nothing to change the dynamics of our world, however hotly we try to defend them. After a hundred years of such endeavors, are there fewer poor; do they love Jesus more; have their lives changed; do they now live to help others? We have only convinced the poor that it is our obligation to give them more and more, and that it is even their right to demand it. They feel less and less gratitude, even if they pretend. And more and more, they curse us if we refuse, as if there were no bottom to our pockets and our only excuse for not giving could be that we are poorer than they are. Less and less do we hear – either from our peers or from our pulpits – about responsibility for our own families, our own friends, or our own purposes and assignments under Christ. And in fact, the lives of liberal Christians get more frantic and more scattered all the time, their homes become weaker and more neglected, and their sense of calling and vocation grows thinner, as they frantically strive to do more and more “good.” The concept of “love your neighbor” is turning into a blight upon the land, as it has become more and more separated from the primary concept that carries and sustains it: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.”* That is the first and greatest commandment, and if we move to the second without knowing the first, we ruin everything we touch. Then it is “my love” that is going to save my neighbor – more and more I try to run and control my neighbor's life, and God has a harder and harder time even getting into the picture.

There are doubtless many dimensions to life. But in the larger perspective, there are two: The physical and the spiritual. The outer and the inner – what we think is going on all around us, and what God is really doing in our world. Jesus came to show us the second – the inner – the larger and more real of these two dimensions. He dealt with the outer world, but we don't have to track Him for very long before realizing that He was focused on and living for a different, spiritual dimension. If we want to follow Him, we have to move toward this inner dimension. When we get baptized, we say we are dying to the outer dimension and coming alive to the inner dimension. Nothing about the Christian Life makes any sense from the perspective of the outer dimension. Those who try to live the Christian Life without changing dimensions end up with a hybrid “faith” that expects worldly success as a trade-off for pleasing God. Jesus or Peter or Paul wouldn't have

lasted ten minutes on that kind of faith. The crucifixion destroyed such constructs forever, though many people still seem blind to this, having refused to pay attention to the real story. Humans don't want to shift to the inner dimension and, for the most part, put it off for as long as possible. That is why it's called "conversion," and why conversion is such a jolt – and why it usually comes to most of us in crisis, and out of the "grace of point zero."

Some of you insist that you have come into the Christian Life on a smooth glide from childhood, because you grew up in the church and had wonderful parents. So did I, yet I get jolt after jolt. So did Peter and Paul and Augustine and Francis of Assisi and countless others. We can both admit that you are more mature, better rounded, and more likable in this world than I am. But why is it that people who have come to faith on this "smooth glide" lack passion for Jesus and His church – lack *commitment* – seldom or never bringing any converts into the Faith? There is a level of surrender missing – an experience of throwing away the old life and coming to Jesus with no holds barred. And over the years, I have noticed that "smooth glide" people always miss what I'm saying; even if they are nice to me (which frequently they are), I sense a resentment – a subtle annoyance – toward me. Why is that? Have I done something wrong, something to hurt you? In some ways yes, the worst hurt of all: I have continually mentioned that the first dimension of life is not enough, and that you should come into a very different one.

In any case, we cannot have a New Year if we are not "new" people in it. If we try to superimpose "newness" on the outer dimensions of life, we only get endless self-help programs, constant disciplines that back-fire, endless programs that make no difference. We can take any precept or teaching of the Christian Life and superimpose it on the outer dimensions of life, and all we ever get is the outer life: institutional religion – stage props without any of the peace of God, without a living relationship with Jesus, without the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit that shapes our lives from within on a daily basis.

Some of you are constantly disappointed because I will not lead this congregation into some really worthy new program or some exciting new cause. And you are right – I will not. That's because you want it to be impressive in the outer dimensions. And I know that will only distract us from the inner dimensions. I am not here to be a substitute for the Holy Spirit. I do not want to be in charge of your lives. I want you to put the Holy Spirit in charge of your lives. And we are only a true church

to the degree that all of us swear allegiance to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, and let Him be our true Leader. And yes, the Holy Spirit will organize and guide and empower us – both individually and together – to the degree that we will allow it. Do you really think I want to step in and destroy that because I'm too impatient to let us authentically grow into that dimension, that obedience, that love and passion for Jesus and His Kingdom? You have a better Leader than me. I am only teacher/preacher. My only purpose is to remind you of who your true Leader really is. And if you ever get a pastor who thinks that she or he is more qualified to guide your life than the Holy Spirit, I hope you will have mind and soul enough to invite them to go lead some other church.

You just heard the Apostle Paul paraphrased, didn't you? *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be banned. As we have said before, so now I say again, 'If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be banned.'"* (Galatians 1:6-9)

Our problem (and our hope) is not how to get successful in the outer world; it is *how to penetrate from the outer world to the inner world* – from the physical reality to the spiritual reality. How do we get close and obedient to Jesus and His Holy Spirit everywhere we turn, in everything we do, in the way we see and perceive everything? Of course, we cannot do that of or by ourselves. Jesus will come to us and work this change within us, if we invite Him; He will move us from the outer to the inner dimension – from the physical to the spiritual life. If this is not true, then all of Christendom is a hoax – sound and fury signifying nothing! But the truth is that the longer we walk the Christian Way, the more we realize that we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit: we can invite and open ourselves to the Spirit; we can desire this penetration from the outer dimension to the inner dimension; at the very least, we can refuse to settle for the outer perspectives.

Am I sounding too vague for you? Credentials, for instance, are necessary in the outer world. We have to take that seriously. We *do* live here. We need college degrees and titles and positions to even get the chance to be very effective here, at least in most cases. You tell your children that all the time. It is your rationale for why they have to work

hard and do well in school. Being spiritual is no excuse for being lazy or irresponsible in the outer world. “In but not of the world” is no excuse for pretending we are not “in” the world.

But Paul is talking to people who are also supposed to be awake to the spiritual dimensions. So he is claiming spiritual credentials far beyond his rabbinical training, far beyond his years of study with Gamaliel. He is claiming credentials beyond his pedigree; beyond his Pharisaism; beyond his Judaism; beyond his Roman citizenship; beyond all his status and work in the outer world. Those earthly credentials, by the way, were still important to how effective Paul became. But with those alone, Paul would not even have been in the Christian Story. So, early in this letter to the Galatians, Paul is claiming his spiritual credentials. They do not cancel out his outer credentials; they simply move far beyond them. And Paul is making it very clear that he did not, indeed could not, get his spiritual credentials from human sources. That would be a contradiction in terms. *“I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin. I did not take it over from anyone; no one taught it to me; I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”* (Galatians 1:11-12) (The Damascus Road, of course.)

Now, we could get all complicated here, but let’s keep it clear and to the point: What drove Paul’s life were his spiritual credentials, not his worldly credentials. Furthermore, while his earthly credentials gave him some expertise and effectiveness that we appreciate – his ability to teach and preach, his understanding of the Scriptures, his confidence in argument, and so forth – his true power and impact came from his spiritual credentials. When push came to shove, as it often did for Paul, he could not escape the light of the Damascus Road, or all the ways in which that opened up his prayer life and his awareness of the presence of Jesus with him ever after. No earthly credentials could have sustained him through beatings, stonings, imprisonments, betrayals, and all the rest. No earthly credentials could have helped him to heal; to move so many hearts and lives; to stand against Peter and Barnabas and the entire weight of the Jerusalem church and its earthly leaders of far more fame and reputation than he had (at least at first), since he had come into the game as an enemy and murderer of Christians. Paul was wrong about some pretty important things, and he made some bad mistakes. No surprise to him. But he moved the infant church from the mindset of a small Jewish cult to a worldwide religion – and to awareness that

Jesus' love was for anyone and everyone who would trust it and receive it. You do not do that with earthly credentials!

Yes, well, hurray for Paul. But that was a long time ago. If we want to come new into *this* New Year, what about *our* spiritual credentials? Never mind your New Year's resolutions; they won't last much beyond this coming week anyway. But what about your spiritual credentials? They are what will drive and guide your life in the coming year – that is, if anything important will.

Beyond your credentials and your reputation in the outer world, beyond your role and effectiveness in the outer world, what are your credentials from the Holy Spirit? Why are you really here, and what are you really here to accomplish? We always – *always* – have to abandon some of the goals and purposes of the outer world in order to follow our spiritual destiny. We always – *always* – have to redirect our outer credentials if they are to serve our Lord and His purposes. What part of your life and identity do you hold on to and follow that you did not get from any human authority (parents, school, friends, boss, or other human source)?

What good is it to know the stories and the Scriptures if we pay no attention to them? *"I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin. I did not take it over from anyone; no one taught it to me; I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."* Yes, well? What about your own declaration of independence from the outer world, and your own claim of allegiance to Jesus Christ? Are we just here to mouth platitudes, or are we really living the New Life in Christ Jesus? The first thing to do, if we want a New Year, is to throw away the human resolutions and get really clear and refocused on our own revelation of Jesus Christ – and on the identity and purpose that we were given from Him.