

1983

### The Indirect Route to Happiness

Dear Friends,

I had in mind to write on the need for routine in our lives, especially in the wake of the hubbub of the festive season. However, for now I will simply pass on a jewel of wisdom which I was informed that a school teacher expressed when asked how she managed to keep her class in order as the holidays approached. She replied that the key was keeping the students in their regular routine. There are worlds of application here which many fail to appreciate, but a word to the wise is sufficient.

What I really want to develop in this letter are some thoughts on what I call the route of indirectness. You may at first be surprised when I say that I commend to you the indirect approach within a certain context. This subject occurred to me as I wondered why so many believing people are let down after Christmas. Such post-Christmas depression does not seem to be part of the...*solid joys and lasting treasure...* of which ... *none but Zion's children know*.

How do we account for these blues which often follow what should be a delightful holiday? I believe that much of the answer is found in the faulty aim which many take at the holidays. They aim directly at Christmas—the gatherings of friends and family, the gifts, the music, and so forth—in order to satisfy longings which Christmas could never satisfy. The mistake is in thinking that Christmas is the substance, the reality, when in truth it is but a reflection, or test of our grasp of the substance.

Technically speaking, holidays present us with a crisis. The word, *crisis*, comes from a Greek verb, KRINVŌ, meaning to judge. So Christmas is really a judgment, or an examination. If our preparation has been done properly, we pass; if not, we fail.

The critical issue becomes one of proper preparation and fitting response to the examination. This is accomplished by our aiming at the crisis indirectly. Take the example of students. The best students always take their exams in this indirect way. They have been positively motivated by the subject, not by the test, so they have been faithfully digesting the subject all along. On test day, they do not panic, nor do they expect from the test any true advance in the subject. You do not learn the subject by taking the test; you simply discover, as your teacher also discovers, how firm or weak a grasp you have of the subject.

The good student aims directly at the subject, and only indirectly at the examination; whereas the poor student aims directly at the test, and by his doing so he commits educational suicide. Ultimately the good student masters his subject and acquires good grades, while the poor student allows the subject to remain foreign, even hostile to him. He may master test taking long enough to pass the course or even graduate, perhaps with honors, but when he later astonishes the world with the depth of his ignorance, and demonstrates that he is devoid of even a common degree of acumen, the fact that he never really was a student devoted to his subject becomes painfully apparent to all.

Many believers encounter the crises of holidays as poor students. They seek from Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, or vacations that which can only be found in the Lord. They aim directly at the holidays for pleasure, and, in their doing so, they create an idol from something which in its proper place does provide legitimate blessing. They aim amiss because they have allowed themselves to desire, even to love, the blessing above the One who gives blessing. As C. S. Lewis in his book, *The Four Loves*, has well said: *This love, when it sets up as a religion, is beginning to be a god—therefore to be a demon. And demons never keep their promises.*

So we must aim at Christmas indirectly, while we aim directly at Jesus. Then we acquire Him and His blessings, as we learn in Matthew 6:33 about seeking first His kingdom and then gaining all other things in their proper order. But a final word of caution is necessary. The poor student may attempt to distort all of this into just a more sophisticated method of test-taking, instead of using it better to learn the subject. There are those who will seek to use Jesus as a means to another end. They want joy, but they know that if they aim directly at it, they will be frustrated. So they act as Indians spearing fish in the river, who calculate the degree of optical distortion caused by the water and aim accordingly. They aim, not directly at what they see as the fish, and so would seem to be taking the indirect route; but the target actually is the fish, and indirect aim is merely a means to this end.

I am not advocating that we aim directly at Jesus in order to gain what we conceive to be a higher or better prize. We must aim at Jesus for Himself. Then, in the process, incidentally, indirectly, we receive pleasure and blessed fulfillment.

Does it seem a riddle? Perhaps it is. He who saves his life loses it, while he who loses it for Christ saves it. The happiest people are those who seek not happiness, but Him. And the quest for Him must go on, not only during holidays, but during all of the routine of life (I end on the initial note!). When we seek Him regularly in His Word, in our church, on our knees, and in all of the ordinariness of our lives, we shall find Him. Then He will transform each day into a true holy day.

Yours in Christ,

William Harrell

## Anatomy of a Prayer Meeting

Dear Friends,

We are all more or less familiar with the account of Jesus cleansing the temple. Matthew records it for us in these words:

*And Jesus entered the temple and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer' but you are making it a robbers' den."* (Mt. 21: 12,13)

The message is as plain as the deed was decisive and effective. Godless commerce had to be cast out of the Church, in order to make room for pure devotion to the Lord. There is in this a dual challenge for the Church (and for the individual believer). We are not to be content merely to throw out or subdue godless preoccupations in the Church, but, lest seven other demons come to occupy the newly swept abode, we must also fill the void with positive and prayerful devotion to Christ.

With such a clear challenge before us, the patent fact that so few so-called Biblical and Reformed churches have prayer meetings can only be to us something of a lamentable mystery. The churches I have in mind are good at casting out of their midst such demons as secular humanism, but the process never seems to arrive at the positive destination of making the Church a house of prayer. My intention in pointing out this fact is not so that we may censoriously throw stones at other churches. I simply want us to recognize that it is with prayer as it is so often with other godly disciplines—we all know more than we practice.

But why should this be so? The simple truth is that an enemy has done this. We can so easily forget that we live in a fallen world, and that even the redeemed must still contend against residual sin, and against the prince of evil who loves to stir up our old nature. We must see prayer in this context of contention or we simply will not pray. We must learn to appreciate that we come to a prayer meeting in order to work, in order to intercede for others who are laboring far a field, in order to call the power and saving grace of God down upon ourselves and our community, in order to help build the kingdom of God and usher in His perfect will (as we are taught to pray: *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done*), and all of this in face of an enemy who dreads the effective use of the weapon of prayer that attacks his dark kingdom. Such an audacious building plan would in itself be enough to discourage the indolent, the timid, or the uncommitted. However, when we realize that we gather in prayer not only to spend our energies in a rigorous work, but also that we must build in enemy-occupied territory, the task would seem to overwhelm the stoutest saint. We must, as did Nehemiah and the Jews of his day, build with one hand and wield a sword with the other.

No wonder that prayer meetings are at a discount. Here I would like to add a note of personal testimony. I can remember when I first attended a prayer meeting, and

how literally sick I felt at the thought of having to pray in the company of other believers. By God's grace working through my grim and absolute determination to pray, I blurted out something of a prayer, and that was that. Gradually I grew more comfortable in prayer meetings to the point where I welcomed the opportunity to make a contribution. But for several years the only prayer meetings I attended were those held in conjunction with a Wednesday Bible Study. Such prayer meetings usually lasted for half an hour or less.

When I went to Scotland, where prayer meetings were on Saturday nights and lasted for two and a half hours or more, I had to make a new adjustment. Not only was it necessary to build up endurance and to strengthen resolve to stay the course, but the satanic element became far more obvious. Saturdays became for me and for my family the most depressing of days. A dark cloud seemed to be hanging over us from the moment we awoke until we were well into the prayer meetings. The clouds always would lift during the meetings, and we would go home to enjoy blessed rest, then arise to a Lord's Day of incredible sweetness. This opposition that I have referred to as dark clouds continues to some extent to come upon me still on the day of a prayer meeting. Yet the clouds are lifting ever earlier in the day. During our last year in Scotland, the clouds would lift by, say, mid-afternoon, and now on a Saturday (our own prayer meeting day) they seem to lift by late morning. But I have come to terms with the fact that Satan will not simply give up and go away. He has too much to lose, and the Church has too much to gain, for him to stop oppressing and opposing those who pray.

From talking with many of you who faithfully participate in our meetings for prayer, I know that depression, anxiety, dark fears, temptations all reach their height on Saturday. We know that the devil is behind it because the one consistent suggestion for relief is that we miss the prayer meeting. Some do cave in and accept this diabolical suggestion, and we all suffer as a result. But most of us have become convinced by the Lord Himself that too much is at stake for us to give in so easily. The opposition is constantly there, but we reckon that He who is in us is greater than the one who opposes us.

So we meet for prayer, week by week, every Saturday night. The glory seems, at times, far removed from such a spiritual sweat-shop, in the same way that beautiful, costly, jewelry seems far removed from deep, dark, and dangerous mines, or the blessings of peace, security, liberty, and the joys of family life seem far removed from the field of battle against an aggressive and tyrannical foe. Yet rich, glorious, and lasting fruits do follow the grinding work of prayer. Those who work the mines most can testify best!

The Lord's intention and commandment is that His Church should be a praying Church. The example of the early believers also encourages us to meet for prayer (cf., Acts 2:42; 6:4; 12:5). The potential results, as we obediently and resolutely give ourselves to the work of intercession, are staggering. Yet as ever it comes to this: Will we be about our Father's business? Will we give ourselves to Him in prayer? Will we be workmen together with God for His glory in the establishment of His kingdom, with all of its rich blessing for ourselves and others? Or do we allow the enemy, who is a liar and a murderer, to dictate the terms?

Prayerfully yours,

William Harrell

## Preaching

Dear Friends,

I want to express some thoughts on preaching. I do this, not by way of apology or defense, but so that we all might be better informed regarding the true nature of preaching, and so that we might be more critically aware of the present state of preaching in our churches. The cardinal rules of modern preaching are brevity and simplicity. The popular three-point alliterative sermon seems to be accepted as the standard in this connection. In many seminaries, theological students are taught that the great preachers have always preached in that way. It is also urged that people's minds have short attention spans and that they cannot assimilate points which are too numerous or too abstract. Hence we have the rationale behind the prevalent twenty minute, three-point sermon.

When visitors worship with us, they are often surprised to discover that: (a) My sermons last for 40 to 50 minutes, and (b) there is rarely an attempt made to reduce a passage to three simple points. This is not because I am seeking to be perverse and abstruse and purposely difficult. I simply believe that the Word itself commends to us its own best structure. Therefore, in some places we find that the arrangement is very structured and easy to follow (e.g., Romans), whereas in other places the propositions are more subtle and complicated (e.g., Daniel, Revelation), thus demanding the diligent employment of all of our mental powers.

By the way some people begin to squirm after the twenty minute point of the sermon has passed, and judging from the alarm, and even defiance with which some respond to the numerous points made in a given message, I have concluded that, for some, the unforgivable sin in preaching is that the message should demand that its hearers think. But let us analyze further this prejudice which many have against long and complicated sermons. On historical grounds it simply is not true that the great preachers employed the simple three-point structure. Indeed, except for a few recent examples, and many modern radio and television preachers, I have not been able to discover the great cloud of three-point, alliterating witnesses. Those such as Calvin, Luther, Owen, Flavel, Edwards, Whitfield, Spurgeon were certainly not among them. Nor do we find such ancient divines as Athanasius, Origen, or Augustine employing the method in question.

With respect to the supposed limited reasoning ability and retentive powers of the average person, I simply refer to such things as television shows, movies, football games, and classroom lectures. These all have an average length of 50 minutes or more, and the widespread devotion to them shows that people can and will follow and remember what they desire.

Of course, someone might object that a sermon, specifically one of my sermons, tends to be more abstract and less concrete than entertainment or secular lectures. Admittedly one can be boring or rambling and disorganized or simply preach above the heads of those who hear. But when due allowance has been made for the capacities of the

hearers I still find that the Word challenges us all to think and to apply ourselves. Incidentally, from my short experience of preaching I have discovered that it is not the uneducated or the intellectually slow who have difficulty paying attention or understanding my preaching; rather it tends to be those who do have the capacity to think who profess to have the most problems following the sermons.

The words of J. Randall Nichols in his book, *Building the Word*, are instructive when the call is for less abstraction and more concreteness in preaching. He says that, *...the capacity to think abstractly is the goal of cognitive development and the mark of adult mental competence.* (p. 35). As we advance from the concrete level of seeing that one orange plus one orange equals two oranges, to the abstract level of accepting the principle that one plus one of anything will always equal two, so we must learn to grow spiritually beyond the juvenile level which demands the easy apprehension of the concrete. In other words, true preaching helps us to think and to apply biblical principles to our lives. We do not escape the concrete realities, but our ability to think in abstract terms allows us to advance to a higher level of competence in dealing with the stresses of ordinary life, to say nothing of our ability to deal with traumatic experiences.

How far do you think our space shuttle scientists and engineers would get if they refused to use their formulae, calculators, and computers, and insisted on having a box of oranges on hand in order to do their math? True preaching should take its structure from the Word, and it should be intellectually, as well as spiritually, challenging. Yet in most cases the standards are far lower than that.

I would like to suggest a complex cause for this malady. It appears that in many places a coalescence of indolence has occurred between the pulpit and the pew. In the first place, it always remains a terrible possibility that the Lord's people can lose their appetite for sound and rich exposition of the Word of God. This is what Paul warns Timothy about when he says that, the time will come when those hearing sermons will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires ... 11 (2 Tim. 4:3). Isaiah (Is. 30:8-11), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:18,19), Ezekiel (Ezek. 2), and others had first hand experience of seeking to preach God's Word to hard hearts and dull ears.

But the pulpit is also certainly to blame when the preaching standard falls to the simplistic and trite. I have already learned that many ministers just do not want to prepare their sermons. I read and research and write out my sermons; then I read on Sundays what I have written during the week. Others prefer to go the route of throwing together an outline or a few thoughts a short time (sometimes merely hours!) before a service. They pietistically proclaim that they prefer to be led by the Spirit at the needed moment, and they claim that a man who writes out and reads his sermons is feeding the people stale manna.

I reply that such brothers should wake up to the twin fact that the Holy Spirit can and does speak to a man during his preparation, and that there is a spirit other than the Holy Spirit who is interested in suggesting thoughts to a man's mind as he preaches. The

ability to preach extemporaneously when the occasion demands it is important, but let those who make a habit or rule of this extraordinary ability, beware.

Furthermore, well prepared sermons should not be likened to stale manna, since the manna which was enjoyed on the Sabbath had in fact been gathered and prepared previously! (cf., Ex. 16: 4,5,22-30). I am convinced that serious and thorough preparation minimizes the tendency which some preachers have of delivering confusing harangues or degenerating into shallow presentations of orthodox clichés. Your minister is committed to a thorough, mature and serious study of the Word of God. He trusts that you will rise to the challenge of hearing and heeding the Word he preaches, so that you will continue truly to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## The Blight of No Risk Love

Dear Friends,

In our Sunday morning studies of I Corinthians we shall soon consider those seraphic words of Paul concerning the nature of love. Accordingly, I intend to address some aspects of love in this letter.

True love is an investment. We open the treasures of our hearts and offer them to another. When the Bible says that God is love (I Jn. 4:8), that is what is meant. The Eternal and Almighty God opened His majestic heart to us by giving His Son, sending Him to live a perfect life, to die a cruel death, and then to be raised again for our justification (Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 4:9,10). The Son of God poured out the treasures of His heart as He willingly gave His life for us: *Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.* (Jn. 15:13). True love is an investment in the life of others of the very best one has to offer.

However, this divine paradigm of love is not set out merely for our aesthetic appreciation. We are not simply to behold it as some work of art, possibly even being moved to tears. The Bible goes on to tell us that, *...if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* (1 Jn. 4:11).

So we who name Christ as Savior are to invest ourselves in others. Nor is this self-giving an option which we may choose to forego. Our Lord Himself has said: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you....* (Jn. 13:34).

This brings us to the rub. We ought to love one another with the self-giving love of God in Christ. But we tend to prefer the no risk variety of love. In economics, no risk or low risk investments are good. No one should throw away his money by investing in a bad risk proposition. But with love, things are different. In fact, Jesus castigates those who are so calculating and stingy with their love: *If you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax gatherers do the same?* (Mt. 5:46).

There are good reasons for this divine censure. In the first place, such no risk love is harmful to those who practice it. When a man gives of himself only that which he can safely lose, and keeps to himself his best or his most true self (the best and true selves should be the same, but, alas, often are not—that's another story!), instead of prospering, and growing strong and rich emotionally, a debilitation sets in which causes him to grow ever weaker and more inadequate. This is so because an inexorable fact of life is in operation. It is illustrated in the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30). To the one who has and properly employs what he has, more shall be given; whereas from the one who does not have even what he has shall be taken away.

So the calculating, self-regarding, stingy sort of love is really self-defeating. C. S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, comments:

*There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one.... Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.*

It is easy to see from this how ruinous such a hard, cold, small heart would be, not only for the individual who fearfully protects it—seeking to save his pitiful life, only to lose it—but also for such an individual's family, friends, neighbors, and fellow believers. This is so because it is ultimately only the love of God in Christ which provides a lasting bond between people. Anything less eventually will serve rather to alienate than to unite people.

The popular no risk brand of love is much less than the love of Paul, who loved his perverted and obstinate brethren so much that he wished himself accursed if only they could be saved (Rom. 9:3). It is less, too, than the love of Paul's Master, who cried over the city which would crucify Him: *Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem .... How often I wanted to gather your children together ... but you were unwilling.* (Mt. 23:37).

But now I change the image to bring in a final point. God's love is an investment, which sometimes is not returned. It is also a consuming fire. His love should so consume our hearts that we are set ablaze with

His love for others. Then His fire in us will spread through us to ignite others, thus lessening the seeming risk involved in the promiscuous giving of such costly love. Yet the fire must be real if it is to transform the lives it touches into its own element. Painted, imitation fires will not do, no matter how pretty they may appear.

So, beloved, let us love and be loved in this way. For this is the excellent and perfect way of the Lord with us, in us, and through us.

In His love,

William Harrell

## Church Unity and Diversity

Dear Friends,

These monthly letters provide me with a vehicle for addressing various concerns which we as a congregation have. They also allow me to articulate, in a form more durable than the spoken word, pertinent aspects of my vision for our church. Such articulation is necessary when something new begins to develop, especially if the new feature seems to be a departure from what some may consider to have been the established philosophy of ministry.

As you know, we are striving to maintain simple congregational structures. Some of the reasons for this were outlined in my May 1982 letter. But now there are some phenomena in the life of our church in addition to our four stated meetings. For example, I know of at least one weekly ladies' Bible study, and some of the men have begun meeting once a month for sharing and discussion. The ladies are studying Mark's Gospel, while the men are seeking to develop a forum for the serious consideration and discussion of various topics. I attended the first of the men's meetings and found it to be very satisfying.

Yet the question some have raised is whether such specialized groups within our church violate the principle of simplicity of congregational structure. To answer that question we must remember the two basic reasons that we are committed to a simple ministry. They are: 1) so that the glory of Christ might not be obscured as we lose ourselves in a flood of special programs, tire ourselves with incessant activity, and fragment and atomize the body of Christ by officially erecting and orchestrating innumerable special interest groups; and, 2) so that we may each be left a wide range for personal growth and service.

The important thing to observe in these twin principles is that the one lays the foundation for the other. That is to say, we do not want to limit our stated meetings simply so that the Lord may gradually become merely one interest among many in our lives. Instead, we keep our congregational structure simple so that when we gather we may concentrate upon worshipping Him and feeding upon His Word and praying for His work here and abroad. Then, from this basis, we should find time and energy and at least some sort of burden to maintain personal spiritual growth and render personal service as the Lord leads.

Such things as the ladies' Bible study and the men's discussion group do not come close to violating either of the above basic principles. They should not be seen as the beginnings of the proliferation of specialized activities in our church, since these functions are not considered to be official stated meetings, nor are they even recommended activities for all.

However, this is not to say that we do not countenance such functions. For as I see it, these free gatherings of like-minded persons represent the pure and spontaneous

outworking of the life of God in the souls of His children. I stress the word *outworking* because the great difference between these sorts of meetings and the official programs which are a part of the structure in so many churches is that we are seeing the indwelling Holy Spirit prompting and leading individuals to launch out in service, instead of finding ourselves victims of the forced labor which results when the stimulus for service is merely something external like a program. It is the difference between delight and duty, between blessing and bitterness, between faith and fear.

I recall discussing with a family who visited our church our aim to keep the official structure simple in order to allow a fostering of individual service. The argument was advanced that unless the church directs its members, even in the personal details of their lives, and unless programs and activities are established, then people would conclude that nothing was going on in the church.

The argument here I believe to be faulty on at least two points. In the first place, there is a tacit assumption that any activity is better than none, and that noise is better than silence. Would those who advocate this course rather listen to static on the radio than to switch the thing off and enjoy silence?

But then the more serious flaw in this argument is found in the low and fearful belief that unless the saints are treated like rats in a maze, constantly being stimulated and manipulated with the enticements of entertainment and so-called Christian diversions on the one hand, and the lash of duty on the other, they will never grow or do anything. I am neither so naive nor do I have such a deficient understanding of the power of residual sin in the believer's heart, that I think there is never a need to give obstinate folks a good push in the right direction. But one's giving of too many pushes from without develops not godly character, not a heart at leisure from itself and free to rejoice in God and serve Him. Excessive external pushes develop at best hypocrisy, and at worst rebellion, as all sense of direction is lost, and all inner, spontaneous motivation is destroyed.

So I believe that we are seeing the outworking of the Holy Spirit's indwelling power as believers freely gather to study or to serve without having to be enticed or threatened by the church leadership. I trust that no one will be offended by the fact that some among us are finding pleasure in various and sometimes quite diverse ways of personally growing and serving and working out in life what has been taken in at our stated meetings. Simplicity and unity in the body of Christ do not imply uniformity. It is not our aim to plane everything and everyone down to the lowest common denominator. Instead, simplicity and unity allow great diversity to be safely developed, resulting not in a fragmented or atomized body, but in a blessed richness, strength, beauty and usefulness—all to the glory of our triune God, whose three persons in one essence provides the ultimate foundation for the unity and diversity we are seeking to cultivate.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

William Harrell

## Humor and Sobriety

Dear Friends,

A study of people's sense of seriousness and humor is not only intriguing, but also instructive. The reason for this, of course, is that seriousness and humor are attitudes or responses to various objects. One can tell an awful lot about a person by taking note of the objects he finds humorous and those he takes seriously. When a pompous prig slips on a banana peel, any sane and normal person cannot avoid being amused. However, when a humble and meek person slips on the banana peel, the normal reaction tends to be of serious concern and sympathy.

It frequently happens that our responses of seriousness and humor get mixed up. For example, increasingly I find that the most disturbed people are those who take themselves too seriously, while they fail to take the Lord seriously enough. Such people are easily offended, tend to be severely censorious, and are, above all, unforgiving. They have no true friends, simply because they have made themselves the center of their affections, and their hearts consequently have shrunk to accommodate the diminutive and pathetic idol of self.

Not surprisingly, such people, almost without exception, maintain at best a casual attitude toward the Lord. Whereas they take themselves with earnest gravity, marking every transgression against themselves with a sort of diamond stylus in an adamant heart, they really could not care less about the glory of God or the cause of Christ. They may read God's Word, but they refuse to believe His promises and usually consider His majestic threats to be vain.

John the Baptist points us in the right direction when he says, regarding himself and Jesus, *He must increase, but I must decrease*. The healthy and growing Christian is one who increasingly has a serious attitude toward the Lord—His will, His Word, and His cause—and an ability to laugh at himself when he has done something silly or stupid.

The prophecy of Isaiah also illustrates what I am talking about. We find in Isaiah 14 a delineation of Satan's attitude wherein he takes himself with deadly seriousness: *I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.* (Is. 14:13,14). There is something awful and tragic in these words, and yet something which we must identify as comical. No wonder we are told that He who sits in the heavens shall laugh! But the devil cannot see the humor in it all. C. S. Lewis in the introduction to his *Screwtape Letters* touches on this when he tells us that being laughed at is one thing the devil cannot endure. Try laughing at him when you are next tempted and see if his power does not dissipate.

The prophets mocked and derided those who took themselves and their false religion seriously. Take a look at Isaiah 44:12-20, especially verse 19 where Isaiah ridicules those who make idols from wood: *No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, 'I have burned half of it*

*in the fire, and also I have baked bread over its coals .... Then I make the rest of it into an abomination. I fall down before a block of wood.'* Or look at Elijah's treatment of the priests of Baal, who earnestly called on their nonexistent god in I Kings 18:27: And it came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, *'Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is*

*occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.*' In effect, these prophets are calling on serious advocates of false religion to see the absurdity and even the comical dimension of their profession. At the same time, the prophets manifest a very serious attitude toward the Lord, who is living, true, and holy. Read of Isaiah's response to his vision of the Lord in Isaiah 6:1-5!

The key to one's having a true and proper sense of seriousness and humor lies in one's keeping an accurate perspective. Regarding this, we all do well to remember that we are dust (and rebel dust at that!), but that the Lord is the source and goal of our being. We must never take ourselves too seriously. Yet, we cannot be too serious about our devotion to Him. The truth is that we only succeed in corrupting and cheapening ourselves by taking the Lord casually and taking ourselves too seriously. I think of the words of Augustine in this connection where he reminds us that the Lord Himself is the believer's crown of glory and reward: *The reward of God is God Himself ... if you love anything beside, it is no pure love.*

*You depart from the immortal flame, you will be chilled, corrupted. Do not depart; it will be your corruption, will be fornication in you.* (Sermon 137).

This is part of what made Jesus tower above the Pharisees of His day. His perspective was perfect; His fidelity to His Father absolute. Jesus took His Father very seriously, while the Pharisees were busy taking themselves too seriously. That is why the Pharisees were always so rigid and intolerant. Their lives were regulated by a multitude of perverted rules which merely served as so many sophisticated fig leaves to hide their true wretchedness. They lacked grace, lacked spontaneity, lacked freedom from themselves. Hence, try as they might, they always responded inappropriately to a given situation. They were stiff and unnatural, lacking joy and good humor as well as a true and proper sense of seriousness.

Jesus was very different. Because His perspective was perfect, His responses were always natural and right. It is true that we cannot detect much humor in the accounts of His life, but that does not mean that He had no sense of humor.

Concerning our Lord's sense of humor, I close with a fairly substantial quote from G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*:

*The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up on a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.*

Joyfully yours,

William Harrell

## Transparency

Dear Friends,

One of the aspects of the character of our Lord which makes His children feel so comfortable and secure with Him is His absolute transparency. When Jesus proclaims His love for us, a healthy believer never finds himself wondering whether such a proclamation is genuine. It is true that the most mature and profound saint cannot fathom the depths and manifold richness of the Lord's character, and so we must not equate transparency with shallowness and superficiality. However, it is equally true that the merest babe in Christ is capable of truly, if not exhaustively, knowing the mind and heart of the Savior, because Jesus so clearly reveals His true self to us.

This transparency of character is best seen in the direct and open actions of our Lord. When Jesus was being interrogated by the high priest, He pointed out this feature of candor which characterized His ministry: *I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues, and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret.* (Jn. 18: 20).

There are those who confuse such an open attitude and direct action with rudeness. Some pietistic souls would call Jesus' actions rude, while other brash and insensitive characters would seek to excuse their own rudeness by dubbing it frankness. But a careful study of the Gospels teaches us that Jesus was never rude; nor was He driven by a compulsion to tell all—that quality which is the hallmark of the childish, careless, shallow, and insensitive person. He was even honest about His secrecy: *I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.* (Jn. 16: 12).

There is a shocking contrast between the transparency of our Lord and the turbidity of His enemies. Where He is genuine and direct, they are insincere and devious, as the following references show:

*And the Pharisees... took counsel with the Herodians against Him (Jesus), as to how they might destroy Him.* (Mk. 3: 6)

*Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together ... and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth, and kill Him.* (Mt. 26: 3, 4)

Here the attitude is one of murder, but the plan is not directly pursued. Some examples of devious lying follow:

*And they came again to Jerusalem . And...the chief priests, and scribes, and elders came to Him, and said to Him, 'By what authority are you doing these things...?' And Jesus said to them, '...Was the baptism of John from heaven, or from men?' And they began reasoning... saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Then why did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From men?'" for they were afraid of the multitude, for all considered John to have been a prophet. And answering Jesus, they said, 'We do not know.'* (Mk. 11: 27-33)

*Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death; and they were finding none. For many were giving false testimony against Him, yet their testimony was not consistent. (Mk. 14: 55,56)*

In addition to these references, read Mark 12: 13 -17 and see there the evil intention of the Pharisees and Herodians being unsuccessfully concealed by a hypocritical approach. Read also in Mark 12: 18 ff where the Sadducees try the same thing. These enemies of Christ ask questions not as humble students who are eager to learn, but as wicked tricksters, who seek to trip up and condemn our Lord. The truly frightening thing about such murky characters is the diabolical degree of calculation they employ. They know that their true purposes (to destroy) must be hidden under the guise of an innocent face (gaining information). Of course Jesus sees through it all, as is evident from the terrible 23rd chapter of Matthew, with its recurring, *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites....* There Jesus exposes these evil, turbid creatures for what they truly are, and He denounces them accordingly.

The sad truth is that such devious characters continue to plague Christ's Church. I can think of a number of occasions when I have endured professing believers' so-called fellowship, which was really not much more than a game of artificiality. They were either unable or unwilling to be genuine, and their crude attempts to cover their true natures infected the whole atmosphere, thus making all of us in it to feel the pressure to pretend.

Needless to say, communication with such people is frustrating, if not impossible. I sometimes get the impression, when speaking with certain opaque individuals, that my words are being refracted through a thick and distorting substance, not unlike honey, while their words are being read from a script, rather than coming from the heart.

Devious and turbid souls can be very cunning and destructive in their actions. You know that they have done something wrong, but unless you have tangible and irrefutable evidence against them, the only response you get is stout denial. And if you can produce the evidence, even if you catch them in the guilty act, they will plead benign intentions. Nevertheless, their intention is far from good; in fact it proves to be destructive. For murky characters tend to sow seeds of discord in a fellowship—all under cover, of course, since they lack the courage and decency directly to challenge a matter with which they disagree. They prefer the cover of darkness, they revel in the safety of indirectness, and they speak, when possible, in neutral and ambiguous terms, feeling the hearer out to see if there is any dark sympathy or weakness which they can exploit for their own selfish purposes.

Surely the challenge is for us to cultivate the quality of transparency. And this should not be too difficult if our characters are being transformed so that they shine increasingly for God's glory. Only evil natures prefer the darkness. But as Paul tells the Ephesians; *You were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of the light, for the fruit of light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth. (Eph. 5: 8,9).* May it be so with us.

Sincerely yours,

William Harrell

## Holy Intimacy

Dear Friends,

Last month I wrote concerning the need for us to be transparent, genuine, and direct, as opposed to our being turbid, insincere, and devious. This month I would like to add another dimension, or qualifying consideration, to this matter of transparency. I would like to express some observations on personal intimacy.

A dictionary will tell you that the word, intimate, comes from the Latin word, *intimus*, meaning within. So, when we speak of intimacy, say, between two people, we refer to an association in which each participant relates to the inmost character, or the essential nature, of the other. Naturally, if we are transparent, we facilitate the development of intimacy between ourselves and others.

There are common assumptions regarding personal intimacy. For example, we assume it is good to endeavor after intimacy with others. Surely this is generally true. Iron sharpens iron only when there is very close contact. But this is just the point I want to explore. It seems to me that the sort of healthy and blessed personal intimacy which the Bible approvingly depicts presupposes a high degree of compatibility between the persons involved. Again, iron sharpens iron. It will not sharpen, nor will it be sharpened by, water, gas, or jelly.

Here is where we must begin to question, or at least to qualify, the general assumption that personal intimacy is always desirable. When Paul quotes Menander's popular proverb, *bad company ruins good morals* (1 Cor. 15: 33 ), or when he asks the Corinthians, *What partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?* (2 Cor. 6: 14 ), he is warning us against the contaminating influence of intimate contact with unbelievers. In addition, John tells us that, *Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men ... He Himself knew what was in man.* (Jn. 2: 24,25). It simply was impossible, not to mention unwise, for Jesus to be on intimate terms with ones so spiritually blind and perverse.

Many people seem to be ignorant of such qualifying principles concerning intimacy. They are the ones who either employ, or allow to be employed against them, various tactics of personal invasion. Examples abound. There are the insensitive and curious, who will invade your life and mind, seeking to assume for themselves the place of the living Word, which alone discerns every thought and intention of the heart. Some sort of personal inadequacy, some sort of death which has not been died in the Lord, compels them to blast you with rapid-fire and usually indiscreet questions. Their true aim is to possess you, digest you, then dispose of you and pass on to someone else.

There was a hint of this in the disciples. Recall when they would have made Jesus king, or think of the incident after our Lord's resurrection, when they wanted to know, *Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?* (Acts 1:6). In

answer we find Jesus graciously but firmly putting them in their places: *It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority.* (Acts 1:7).

There are also people who may be termed users. The object they have in view is not so much to establish personal intimacy as it is to feed off of others, as a parasite feeds off of its host. They tend to use some form of emotional blackmail, presenting themselves as poor needy souls (which they usually are!); but instead of maintaining a posture of true humility commensurate with their status, there is a clear underlying demand, as if it were a matter of right, that one dance to their tune and meet their need. Such were the multitudes who sought Jesus after His feeding of the five thousand. However, our Lord saw through their carnal motives and challenged them, saying, *Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs* (so as to understand and believe), *but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.* (Jn. 6:26). They were not interested in Jesus, except to use Him for their own purposes.

Finally, we have that awful class of brutes, the spiritual tyrants. These self-appointed and purportedly super-spiritual guardians of the faith and practice of the universe resort not to the questions of the curious nor to the emotional blackmail of the users; rather, they rise in titanic arrogance to confront others directly with the others' utter unworthiness and absolute accountability to themselves.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day were such spiritual tyrants. Sadly enough, their modern counterparts continue to stalk the earth, seeking to strike dread and anguish into the souls of those who, in their eyes, have failed to measure up to standard. But read Mark 11: 27-33 to see how Jesus dealt with such hard brutes.

The point we should recognize is that there are literally hordes of folks surrounding us with whom we could never, and should never, acquire personal intimacy. Their incompatibility with us makes the attempt impossible, unwise, even dangerous. Nevertheless, we can heedlessly go on, in the quest for personal intimacy, being victims of the attempts of others to invade and occupy our inmost personalities, or else we can be, more or less unwittingly, the victimizers in the awful tactic of personal invasion. The results are always disastrous.

Yet the pressures to invade and to be invaded have increased greatly in our age. Such technological advances as the telephone, the television, and the computer open for us not only great potential for good, but also great potential for woe. We can know and be known today in a way in which no generation has ever experienced. The time and trouble required for communication years ago provided an inherent opportunity for people to think and reflect before they spoke. Now we merely pick up a telephone and speak off the top of our heads, and unless we are wise enough to allow ourselves time to reflect before we decide, we respond to another's phone call without due consideration. Surely we all have our limits, we all require a degree of privacy, lest we find ourselves, not only invaded, but split open and releasing personal fallout, as atoms which are split release nuclear fallout.

So I believe that the admonition from Jesus for us to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves comes to us with a new sense of urgency. We must be transparent, shining lights, and yet we must guard ourselves against unwarranted and indiscriminate personal invasion. There is a matter of balance and poise involved here, which is impossible to attain or maintain without the gracious power of the Holy Spirit. Only He can help us and lead us in the way of Jesus, who taught in parables, so as to reveal Himself and hide Himself at the same time (cf. Mt. 13:10-15). The Holy Spirit will help us increasingly to enter the way of our Lord, who withdrew frequently from the crowds, and even from His own disciples, in order to maintain His transparency and His intimacy with His heavenly Father. For it is only to the degree to which we are open and intimate with the Lord, who is the true Lover of our souls, that we are enabled to be holy and effective lovers of others. Then transparency, sincerity, and directness will characterize our lives, as will true intimacy, which is founded upon mutual respect, freedom, and responsibility.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Satanic Strategy

Dear Friends,

For months I have had the topic of Satan's wiles in mind. I have wanted to address this practical subject, yet have hesitated for several reasons. Now, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's high-handed destruction of a South Korean commercial airplane, I believe that some considered thoughts on satanic strategy are in order. For this atrocity is just a glimpse of an evil fang from the smiling monster who would lull the world into a false sense of security. The kindly facade (reinforced by our own too sanguine hopes) cannot quite cover the entire beast, and when we catch such glimpses of its true nature, we are shocked, outraged, and perplexed. Yet, our revulsion is short lived. We soon revert to the pleasant, though deadly business of being mesmerized by our foe.

The Soviets proclaim that they are for peace, but what do their actions say? Ah, there's the rub. It is messy, dangerous, costly business discerning and exposing things as they truly are. The easier way, at least in the short term, is to for us to accept the lie and hope for the best. *Come into my web*, says the spider to the fly! However, my intention is not simply to castigate the Kremlin. Anyone with a modicum of moral sense and a minimal grasp of reality can see and deplore, at least for now, the frightening evil which motivates such callous, atheistic pragmatists with whom the bottom line is always that might makes right.

I am more interested in the strategy of the enemy behind this enemy.

It is neither simplistic, nor is it superstitious, to maintain that Satan is the motivating master behind such evil men as the Soviet leaders obviously are. Like begets like, by their fruits you know them, and so on. Jesus had some pretty harsh things to say to the precursors of our contemporary atheistic pragmatists: *You are doing the deeds of your father .... You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar, and the father of lies.* (Jn. 8: 41-44).

When Jesus says that the devil is a liar and murderer from the beginning, He identifies two vital things for us: (1) that the devil's essential nature is destructive, and (2) that he attempts to disguise this fact via his deception. Therefore, to perceive things truly where the devil is concerned, we must not be shallow, lazy, and gullible in our judgments.

The first and primary ploy of Satan is deception. I believe that such films and literature which graphically depict satanic possession and supposed demonic activity are almost an embarrassment to the devil. Of course he salvages something for his nefarious purposes from such things when he uses them to beget in certain poor souls a dreadful preoccupation with evil. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, Satan is happy with either of two extreme responses to himself—ignorance or obsession. Yet, I am certain that given

the choice, Satan would rather remain hidden under his cloak of deception. Obsessed, excited fanatics are too unpredictable even for him! Spiritual sleepers, shallow, unreflective, undiscerning lackeys serve his purposes better.

Satan resorts primarily to deception for two very good reasons. In the first place, his true motive (murder) is too awful to proclaim baldly, except where the most sinister characters are involved. Hence he must masquerade as an angel of light, projecting the image that he is truly concerned for our welfare. He seeks to obliterate from our minds any true conception of the Lord, and substitutes himself and his plan as our better option. This was done with astonishing effect in the garden with our first parents. It never ceases to amaze me that Adam and Eve were defeated by mere words.

That brings us to the second reason why Satan prefers deception as his main strategy. We frequently forget that he is a creature. As such, his power is not limitless. Therefore he must employ the least costly and most efficient means possible to achieve his end. Words are always easier to manipulate than are physical things. Who wouldn't rather be able to talk a strong man into giving up his sword instead of having to wrestle it from him?

Some may object that the devil, being a spirit, has no choice but to use words. I say read Job. As Mafia godfathers do not directly touch their opponents, but through their mobster agents have such opponents removed, so the devil, if he must, can literally twist our arms via his minions. But he would rather talk us to sleep. It's less complicated and costly for him.

When mere deception fails to overcome a discerning believer, the devil shifts his tactic. It is more costly for him, but when deception proves insufficient, he begins to employ temptation. We see him trying his hand at this in Matthew 4, where he encounters Jesus in the wilderness. Whenever we shake off the drowse his deception would effect, then Satan must bestir himself to probe our weaknesses. Even if he thinks he has found a soft spot in us (and even the best of us have plenty!), he will get to work setting his traps, luring us into the wilderness of sin by any and all means at his disposal. If he cannot cause us to stumble into gross sin, he will settle for something more respectable. He will promise whatever appeals to us, and, if need be, he will deliver a few paltry tokens of what was promised, in order that we might become entangled in his web. How many fine believers have lost their keen edge by settling for worldly comforts, a seemingly secure job, even an incompatible spouse brought along by the devil, not by the Lord?

However, there are soldiers of the cross, who have their senses trained to discern good and evil (Heb. 5: 14 ), and who have attained a degree of spiritual maturity and strength which enables them to resist consistently the devil's temptations. Does Satan leave them alone? Of course he does not. He simply shifts his tactic to that of all-out attack. Such a direct frontal assault is the most arduous and costly for the devil, and hence he resorts to it only in extreme instances.

Examples of Satan's all-out attack can be found in Job. Peter also warns us that the devil prowls about like a lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5: 8). The prime example of this tactic, however, is found with Jesus on the cross. There all of the powers of evil joined in a hellish cacophony for the purpose of inspiring wicked men to destroy the Lord of glory. For a time they seemed to succeed, but the resurrection proved that it was sin and Satan and the whole empire of evil which had been dealt a death blow in the death of Christ. Still, the victory was gained by the costly and heroic giving and receiving of many blows, or, as Scripture represents it, by giving and receiving bruises: *He (Christ) shall bruise you (Satan) on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.* (Gen. 3: 15).

Many believers faint at the thought of the cost and suffering involved in detecting and engaging the devil in battle. It simply seems easier to ignore him and hope that he will go away. Such appeasement never pacifies the tyrant. To resist him—with all of the deaths and bruises involved in that resistance—is the way of life; to give in to him, to succumb to his wiles at any level, whether deception, temptation, or all-out attack, is the way of death.

The final point I want to make for now on this subject is that the devil continues to employ deception on every tactical level. It is a very practical point to remember that even his temptations and all-out attacks are not nearly as bad as he would have us believe. He is an inferior and defeated foe. His strength is not nearly as great as he boasts it to be. True, he can bruise us, but we can crush him through the power of the victorious and indwelling Christ (cf. Rom. 16: 20 ; 1 Jn. 4: 4). Satan is more subtle than strong. We must claim this by faith, and so detect him and resist him and vanquish him, for the glory of God and for the peace and security of ourselves and others.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Contentment

Dear Friends,

We often hear cries from certain pious souls lamenting the ill effects which our great personal and national wealth produces. Our tendency towards materialism represents one such ill effect. Yet, frequently our lamentations can ascend as poorly defined groanings which we cannot utter. We can bemoan our plight in such a general way that nothing ever comes of it. Like infants, we may howl and rage over we know not what. It is surely right that we shun materialism. However, we must not do this in the manner of the materialists, whether they be the rich, seeking to placate a guilty conscience, or the poor, nurturing covetousness. Theirs would be the shallow and vague moanings, issuing more from their irresolution about truly giving up the love of money, than from any pure and spiritual source.

We can add some definition and fruitful particulars to otherwise ill-defined groanings when we approach the matter from the perspective of contentment. The Bible has much to say about peace, rest for the soul, and contentment, as well as about the restlessness and discontentedness caused by sin, and by sin's author, Satan. (Gen. 4:14; Prov. 28:1; Job 1:7; Is. 48:22).

It is virtually self evident that the spirit of our industrialized western society runs contrary to the Biblical teaching on contentment. We know that worldliness breeds misery, rather than satisfaction, in the heart of a believer. A brief reflection upon the workings of our consumer society helps us to understand some of the reasons for this. For example, two related attitudes are inculcated through most of the advertisements which bombard us daily: selfishness and discontentedness. Advertising companies seek to foster dissatisfaction in us so that we will continue our quest for contentment via our acquiring goods and services. Commercial corporations seemingly would have us to be like so many delta semi-morons in Huxley's *Brave New World*, whose benumbed state allows them only to chant incessantly for their daily ration of soma.

Any believer in his right mind will denounce such madness. But we must be careful not to blame our consumer society as if we ourselves were innocent victims. The truth is that we are the consumer society. *Thou art the man!* Furthermore, the question arises: What or whom shall we invite to replace our penchant for materialism? Obviously the orthodox answer is that we must find our satisfaction in the Lord. However, I would like briefly to expand what this means.

In the New Testament, we encounter two Greek words which are translated *content*. One is in 1 Timothy 6: 8, where Paul says, . . . *if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content*. The Greek word used here comes from the verb, avrke,omai, meaning to be satisfied, and is pictured as one's coming to terms with the limited options or resources which the Lord has provided.

Where the world floods us with choices and options, resulting in restless dissatisfaction, the Lord provides humble fare, daily bread, and we are content. Moreover, we are productive as we pursue the divine path. When we are bombarded with choices, we become paralyzed, halting between seemingly infinite opinions. This accounts for much of the identity crisis with which many unstable and inadequate people struggle. Such poor souls cannot appreciate objects, persons, or cultures without attempting either to possess them or despise them. On the other hand, the Lord sets before us a clear path of duty, fortifies us with His gracious provision, and off we go, happily and fruitfully. Here, too, the way is wide which leads to destruction and narrow which leads to life.

The Greek word the Bible uses for our word, *contentment*, is *autarkeia*. Paul uses this word in 1 Timothy 6:6, and a variation of it in Philippians 4: 11, where he says, *I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am*. This word conveys the force of one's being self-sufficient (cf., automatic, automobile, etc.), in the sense of one's not being dependent upon circumstantial conditions for satisfaction. This is a more positive notion than that of merely learning to cope with limited resources.

The point is that Biblical contentment is not a negative thing. The Lord does not subject us to a sort of spiritual lobotomy in which we lose our sense of appreciation for things of the world. If He did, the beautiful imagery in the psalms or even in the final chapters of the book of Revelation would be meaningless to us. Sanctification makes us more human, more observant and appreciative, more artistic, not less.

There is a movement from who and what we are now to this blessed realm of contentment. I do not mean by movement a sort of oscillation between asceticism and materialism. The epicenter of that sort of motion is misplaced, being a restless self. Rather, the movement is from death to resurrection. It is the giving up of all things for Christ's sake, especially those things which, strangely, God's grace enables us to appreciate and even to love (cf., Abraham with Isaac in Gen. 22). Resurrection follows, as we receive from Christ a hundred fold above what we gave up. If we lose our lives in Him, then we shall find them. (cf. Mk. 10:28-31; Lk. 6:38; Jn. 12:25).

Deep and enduring contentment ensues because it is grounded in the Lord of glory, who is far more precious and stable than mere goods and services. When we take Him as our portion, it is with us as David says: *The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places .... In Thy presence is fullness of joy. In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever*. (Ps. 16: 6,11).

Therefore, if we develop an attraction for materialism, we have cause to groan deeply and specifically for this reason: that we have allowed lesser things to uproot from our hearts our first and true love. We can never find lasting contentment apart from Him, as Augustine, in his *Confessions*, has well said: *Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee*. Are we finding our rest, our contentment, our self-sufficiency in our all-sufficient God? I do hope so.

Prayerfully yours.

William Harrell

## Reflections on the Constituting Service of Immanuel Presbyterian Church

Dear Friends,

I hope to encourage you by sharing some reflections upon the service that constituted our mission work into a church, which took place on Sunday, October 16th. I know that we frequently feel the seemingly heavy, corrective hand of the Master, as He pounds those who are His workmanship into shape. Or, to change the image, those of us who are laborers in the Lord's vineyard can become so consumed with the arduous work, that we may tend to grow discouraged. At such times, our wise heavenly Father would have us take a moment, back up from the plot of ground which each one is working, and survey the cumulative effect of His work in and through us. It is then that we can take a sort of Sabbath delight in the things which have been accomplished, and draw refreshment and encouragement as we catch a glimpse of the shape of things to come.

Our constituting service provided for us such a time of seeing what has so far been made of us, and beholding its goodness. Anyone who was at that service can testify to the reality of a spirit of true worship, as well as the sweet grace of loving fellowship. But lest some should think that my words are the result of the romantic hopes of a young organizing pastor, I will follow the instruction of wise Solomon to, *Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.* (Prov. 27: 2). We had between 30 and 40 visitors, or friendly strangers, at our service of organization, so I will proceed to give a brief account of their response to our service, and, more importantly, to our people.

A Commission from James River Presbytery conducted our constituting service. Prior to the service, the six members of that Commission examined those men who had been nominated from our body to serve as elders and deacons. The unanimous testimony of the members of that Commission, which was expressed not only through their convener at the service, but also was related by each of the Commission's members to me before and after the service, was that they had never examined men so thoroughly prepared in mind and heart and hand for the prosecution of their leadership responsibilities. Such observations take on added significance when we bear in mind that most of the members of the Commission have examined numerous candidates for the offices of elder and deacon in other churches. Hence, we should not think that their assessment of our men issues from inexperienced well-wishers.

Our dear brother, Timothy Keller, brought us a full, rich, encouraging, and challenging message from Ephesians 4: 1-16. He remarked on the rapport—or what I have heard one student of preaching call the blessed resonance—which was established between speaker and hearers. This resulted in a synergism which enabled the speaker to experience increased liberty, and the people to experience a growing sense of exultation, serious self-examination, godly resolution, and so forth, as the Word exerted its edifying power.

As far as our singing went, the Lord's hand of blessing was upon us in no small degree. Our members can sometimes take hearty singing for granted. But those who come into our midst from situations which may justly be characterized as the melodic doldrums cannot help but express surprise—almost astonishment—at the experience of joining in the rapturous melodies flowing from liberated hearts which seek to worship the living God.

Finally, many visitors expressed their pleasure and gratitude for the warm and loving fellowship which was enjoyed after our service. I do not think that anyone left immediately after the benediction. The cords of love drew us together, and there was a dynamic of give and take, calling upon each one to partake of and contribute to a winsome corporate spirit. This was facilitated greatly as a result of the labors of those who helped prepare our meeting hall. As far as was possible, the plain, almost dingy social hall of the Y.M.C.A. was transformed into a garden of delights. Men, women, and children helped after our Saturday prayer meeting to clear out wrestling mats, and excess tables. Extra chairs were set up and food was planned, prepared, and attractively set out for us after the service.

I am personally grateful beyond words for these loving labors. But the warmth of our fellowship was generated not so much from physical provision as from hearts which had been to some extent mastered by the grace of our Savior. As I had occasion to survey the wonderful mixture of people, happily sitting and sharing in various groups, or moving about, mingling with one another, I could not help but think of Psalm 133:

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is*

*For brothers to dwell together in unity.*

*It is like the precious oil upon the head,*

*Coming down upon the beard,*

*Even Aaron's beard,*

*Coming down upon the edges of his robes.*

*It is like the dew of Hermon,*

*Coming down upon the mountains of Zion ;*

*For there the Lord commanded the blessing—life forever.*

How do we account for this good and pleasant phenomenon that we experienced? The Apostle John helps us to answer this. Take his phrase: *...whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.* (1 Jn. 5: 1). Logically we can work our way backwards in analyzing these descriptive words: (1) We love our fellow believers; (2) therefore, we love the Father. Our love for the Lord, then, would seem to be the source of our love for the brethren. John confirms our logic when he writes: *And this*

*commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.* (1 Jn. 4: 21). However, there is a higher cause for our love. Again it is John who informs us that, *We love, because He first loved us.* (1 Jn. 4: 19). Hence, we must conclude that it is to the degree in which we are drawn close to the living source of love, and are enabled to enjoy holy communion with Him, that we are enabled to love one another. Through this process, we increasingly are filled with gracious power from on high for this purpose: Not simply to behave decently for a special meeting, or only for our regular stated meetings; but so that enduring bonds of love may be forged between us as we commit ourselves to one another, subject ourselves to one another in the fear of Christ, invest ourselves and learn to delight in each other.

I stress the fact that all of this takes time. Loving relationships are built up over long periods of time, over years of mutual commitment to the Lord and to one another in the Lord. They are established through thousands of decisions we make respecting each other, through manifold trials and blessings which we experience together, until we grow in true intimacy and loving respect for one another. Moreover, this does not happen automatically, as if just spending years together will unite us in Christ's love. We are commanded to love one another, because remaining sin within each of us, as well as the world and the devil, would conspire to undermine the development of this most precious commodity.

I truly believe that the blessed experience of our organizational service was a token, a sort of early blossom, of the fruit of the love of God being shed abroad in our hearts. We still have a very long way to go, but I am certain that we are headed in the right direction. Therefore, let us not lose heart as we labor and together face the new challenges which lie before us. For now it is back to our work in the vineyard that we go, back to the Master's workshop for us all. As our brother Tim Keller reminded us, our task is two-fold: (1) To preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace from all malignant and corrupting forces and influences (Eph. 4: 3); and (2) to grow up completely in Christ, our head, from whom and through whom the whole body is enabled, by the proper working of each individual part, to grow and build itself up in His love. (Eph. 4: 15, 16).

Yours in Christ's love,

William Harrell

## The True Christ of Christmas

Dear Friends,

You will forgive me if I seem to be indulging in a consideration of a well-worn theme. As Christmas approaches I intend to express some thoughts upon the radical difference between the way in which the world observes this holiday, and the believer's manner of celebration. It is my hope not to state the obvious. We can all detect and deplore the crass commercialism which appeals to one's uncrucified ego with the idols of material possessions. To the degree that the philosophy of the hedonist (i.e., eat, drink, and be merry) still infects us, we may fall into Madison Avenue snares, or even MacDonalD hamburger snares: *You deserve a break today. So get up and get away to MacDonalDs.* We may stumble in this way, but we know that it is wrong. As I said, I do not want to state the obvious. Crass commercialism is almost as easy for the believer to identify as is the phenomenon of a blue sky.

I am concerned with something a bit more subtle, namely, the way in which this worldly spirit insidiously affects Christians. This is a process which goes on continuously, but which is most easy to identify and most appropriate to consider at Christmas. For the sad truth is that unless we remain on our guard, we can slip into a merely carnal appreciation of and desire for a sort of commercial or utilitarian Christ. Then, for example, we may find a growing affinity between our celebration of Christmas and that of the world. What is more, we may also discover that if we fall into this sort of worldly pit, we will, notwithstanding our dismay, learn to pack up and put away the Lord, as if He were one of our Christmas ornaments.

How is it that believers can become entangled in such a snare? Probably the main reason is that unwary saints fall prey to the devil's devices by giving themselves to a fake Christ. It is not as though Satan presents for our consideration an obvious counterfeit. Frequently his tactic is simply to prevent us from knowing and worshipping the whole Christ.

The most common instance of this is when Christ is presented as Savior only. Here we have a wonderful truth, announced by an angel from heaven to Joseph: *...you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.* (Mt. 1:21). However, if we do not go on to consider the various dimensions of our Savior's person and work, we not only reduce Him, in our own eyes, to the proportion of Savior only; we reduce Him to phantom status, which means that He is no Savior at all.

Whatever men, women, or children may say, we must contemplate actions in order to discern whether one has this propensity to follow the phantom. For example, how many professing believers do we know (including ourselves), whose actions betray the fact that they worship the utilitarian Christ? For such people, Jesus is merely a life preserver, a heavenly plumber, or a divine garbage man. He is ever there at man's beck

and call, for the sole purpose of repairing damage or cleaning up the messes which man makes. Of course few people want to have an intimate and loving relationship with the plumber or garbage man, so when the repairs are made and the mess cleaned up, this utilitarian Christ is dismissed. Why, He may not even receive so much as a thank you from those who view His service as His duty. Indeed, they are the ones who grow increasingly critical of His work, until they are filled with bitter resentment over what they take to be their Savior's incompetence.

Is this not a sad but realistic, even familiar, scenario? In relation to this I think of a television commercial which urges us to read the Bible (talk about the commercial Christ!). In it a young man has everything he could possibly want, but he is not happy. The commercial ends with the announcer telling him (and the T.V. audience), *You can be happy, read the Bible, and find out what you've really been missing.* The message here is even less than that which proclaims that Jesus is Savior only. Here the Lord is presented as a sort of optional extra, a heavenly entertainer whose all-consuming concern is to make people happy.

There is a common fatal deficiency in these conceptions of Christ. It is the assumption that man, with his needs and wants, is the very center of the universe. All of reality, all of heaven and earth, even God Himself, every soul and all things, are considered as mere objects to be employed or manipulated by man, as a child plays with his toys on Christmas morning. And the utilitarian pseudo-savior, forged in the fires of hell itself, confirms and appeals to such a selfish mentality.

On the other hand, the true Christ is a true Savior and more. He is our great High Priest, as the writer to the Hebrews makes clear: *But when Christ appeared as a high priest... He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle...and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all....For if the blood of goats and bulls...sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?* (Heb. 9:11-14).

Here is a Savior, indeed, who not only deals with our personal miseries, thus overcoming the consequences of our sins, but who also gives us a positive motivation toward God. The pseudo-savior vainly purports to save one's life for one's self. The true Christ actually saves us from sin's guilt, power, and ultimately, from sin's presence. We are saved by the true Savior from sin and for God.

The true Christ is also our Prophet. His Word informs us regarding the attributes and will of God. He also reveals to us our true state of need, and hence arouses us from our fatal ease. By the Word of Christ we are literally given life, being lead out of darkness and ignorance, deception and death, into His light and knowledge, truth and life. This is so because by His Word we are led to the true Giver of freedom and life, as He has said: *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.* (Jn. 6: 63). The pseudo-savior tells us that life is found

within ourselves or discovered by our own efforts, and that we have the right and power to enjoy it: *You surely shall not die. For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.* (Gen. 3:4,5).

Finally, the true Christ is our Lord or King. He rules over all by virtue of who He is, as well as by virtue of what He has done. Paul makes this point clearly in Philippians 2:10,11, where he says that, *...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* The will of Christ, not our will, is paramount. It is our duty, as well as our delight to obey Him. Whereas, the pseudo-savior, by his weak and pathetic posture, has no will, purports to be infinite indulgence, and hence commands no respect. He is an idol, not a King!

So let us remember that the Lord Jesus Christ is our Prophet, Priest, and King. True faith embraces Him in all three of these capacities, and responds appropriately with humble obedience, and holy, awesome joy. Such a response is a true celebration of Christmas, in which we not only receive this blessed Savior and Lord with deepest thanksgiving, but in which we also give ourselves completely to Him for His pleasure and glory.

Yours in Christ,

William Harrell