

"Authentic Christianity" 1 Thess. 1:1-10 May 28, 1995

Gordon Clark, the late Christian philosopher, tells of a conversation he had once with a young woman. She attended a church that he knew nothing about and so had asked her to describe it to him. "Well," she said, "first of all her church didn't believe in using lipstick." Dr. Clark says that he kept politely silent, but thought to himself that he would be little interested in finding out what that church put in second place. [What Presbyterians Believe, 19]

Now, if you were to describe in just a few words, this church, the church you attend, what might you say? Well, Paul from time to time gave us a picture of one of his churches in just a few words. Every now and then he gives us, in the form of a snapshot in one of his letters to churches a concise summation of Christian faith and life -- what it meant for those people to be Christians or to live a Christian life in just a sentence or two.

For example, Paul provides such a summation in his opening remarks to the Christians in Colosse (Col. 1:10-12):

"...we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light."

That is what real Christianity, authentic Christianity is like, that is its character and what he hoped its character is and will be in the church in Colosse: doing good works that bear fruit for the Lord; growing up in the knowledge of him; in the strength which he supplies, bearing patiently the trials and afflictions of life, with the joyful confidence that, for the Christian, to live is Christ and to die is gain! Much more might be said and is said, of course, but that is it in a nutshell.

We have another such concise summation of the Christian faith and life in Paul's opening remarks to the Thessalonian Christians. We read it in vv. 9-10. How might one describe the Thessalonian Christians, their faith and life together? Well, says Paul, to put it in a few words,

"...[they] turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead -- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."

That is a Christian and a Christian church: folk who have turned away from the false gods mankind is forever inventing for itself to serve the living God, in the prospect of eternal life through Jesus Christ the Savior of sinners.

Now, the mention of the living and true God and of Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath indicates that lying beneath this way of life is a foundation of doctrine and faith. I want, this morning, to speak of the way of life as Paul has described it so succinctly and tersely, but we must notice that it is founded upon and depends upon certain convictions that these Christians

had and that all Christians must have.

Paul spoke of this earlier when, in verse 6, he described how the Thessalonians had "welcomed the message with joy given by the Holy Spirit." There is a "message" that must be believed and embraced. There can be no Christian life until first there is Christian belief and conviction. There is a set of facts upon which alone godly living can be based and sustained.

This is, by the way, a principle of human life in general. In a celebrated article in Atlantic Monthly [December, 1989] a few years ago, Glenn Tinder, professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts, asked the question "Can we be good without God?" The article was not about goodness in the full biblical sense, but was a consideration of whether a society could be good in a political sense without some transcendent basis for that goodness. Political goodness, Tinder argued, almost everyone agrees, requires the genuine affirmation of the dignity and equality of individual persons. People think these are secular values, but, Tinder argued, as a matter of fact, they are not and have never been. They have been founded upon biblical religion rather than secular rationalism. What is more, he went on to say, Nietzsche's logic seems inescapable: We cannot give up the Christian God and continue to hold on to Christian morality. The "incalculable worth" of every individual and a "responsible hope" for the political order require a transcendent ground or basis or foundation: therefore, Tinder concluded, as a matter of fact we cannot be good as a society without belief in God. [in Jones, Biblical Christian Ethics, 115-116.]

Well, how much more the specific godliness and holiness and fruitfulness of life which is taught and commanded and illustrated in God's Word. That Christian life depends upon Christian belief for its shape and form, for its motive -- without which it is not true godliness at all -- and for its impulse, its power, its vitality.

We know what that message is: the living and true God, his nature and character as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, his creation of mankind in his own image, the fall of man into sin, God's wrath and judgment of sin, deliverance from that wrath by the grace of God alone through the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the summons issued to men and women everywhere to believe in Christ and by so believing to receive the forgiveness of their sins and to become the sons and daughters of God, the indwelling of believers by the Holy Spirit, his calling them into the life and fellowship of Christ's church, Christ's coming again, the day of judgment, and the looming prospect of eternity.

We are speaking especially of what C.S. Lewis and, long before him, the Puritan Richard Baxter called "Mere Christianity," that is, not the specific confessional position of a particular church or denomination or theological tradition within Christendom, but that grand, central belief that is common to all true Christians: the Christian faith as understood, in St. Vincent of Lerins famous phrase, *ubique et ab omnibus*, everywhere and by everyone. That is the message that the Thessalonians embraced with joy, the truth they believed and upon which they established the new way of life that Paul so tersely describes in vv. 9-10. Without that belief the life was impossible, with that belief, with those convictions truly in the heart, the life was inevitable.

Now Paul reduced the whole of the Christian life in this summation of it, to two things. No

doubt he could have described it differently, but by the Spirit of God, he said: you can think of the Christian life, the life of any true son or daughter of God as consisting of two things:

I. First, it is the life of service to God.

This does not, at first sight, seem to commend Christianity and the Christian life, to say that it is the life of a servant, of someone who lives his or her life at the pleasure of another.

But, every human being does! As Bob Dylan put it in his famous song: "You've got to serve somebody." It is in our nature, made in God's image as all human beings are, to live our life for something, for someone, serving at the pleasure of something or someone else. As C.S. Lewis put it: "I was not born to be free; I was born to adore and to obey."

Man in sin simply refuses to obey **God his maker** and chooses instead to offer his obedience elsewhere. The human heart, someone has written, is "an idol factory," creating endless substitutes for God to provide the transcendent reality that human nature craves. Such idols, of course, do not have to be supernatural. In Eph. 5:5 the Apostle Paul writes that both sexual immorality and greed are forms of idolatry, extracting from men and women a measure of allegiance and commitment and hope that is due to God alone.

Some people are eaten up with ambition, they live their lives for the accumulation of fame, or power, or status: anything that raises them in the estimation of others. Others serve pleasure and are forever making their choices in the service of this "god." And these gods have their demiurges, their subordinate gods, their minor deities that people worship as mediators of their real god: TV, alcohol, sports, money are such minor deities.

We have read about animistic cultures and the power that their idols exercised over hearts and minds of those people. For centuries they lived in dread of their gods and in cruel and degrading submission to them. The very thought of breaking away from them filled them with alarm and terror that the gods would take vengeance on them. And folk everywhere in sophisticated, 20th century America are just that way with their idols, their god-substitutes. Afraid of what turning from them might mean, what consequences might ensue; much preferring the service of these idols, cruel and degrading as it is in so many ways, to the terrifying unknown.

And so it had been with the Thessalonians, idolaters all of one kind or another, giving their service to a god who could do nothing for them and did not deserve their homage. And then the gospel came and taught them that these idols are nothing, false gods of human imagination, leading men and women away from the true fulfillment of life because leading them away from the living God, their Maker, whom, in Christ, they may know as their heavenly father. He is the God they were made to serve, the God who deserves all the worship they can ever bring, and who will give them freely, for love's sake, all they ever hoped to receive from their gods and much more.

It was of this sense of freedom in service, and fulfillment in the surrender of one's life to God's sovereignty that Simone Weil, the French Christian philosopher was speaking when she wrote: "Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves; slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I

among them." That is, you see, true of those who come to know that they are slaves -- most idolaters never understand that, clear as it may be to others. But once you know you are a slave, then you are ready to transfer your service to a true God, a just and loving Master, who loves his slaves as if they were his own sons and daughters!

For the Thessalonians, and for Christians ever since, to be enrolled as a slave of the living God was the highest honor, and the greatest freedom, and the truest fulfillment possible.

And nearly 2,000 years later that same discovery still transforms lives. Here is John Stott, as a teenager, confiding to his diary the circumstances of his coming to Christ [Basic Christianity, 128]:

"Yesterday really was an eventful day!...Up till now Christ has been on the circumference and I have but asked him to guide me instead of giving him complete control. Behold, he stand at the door and knocks. I have heard him and now he has come into my house. He has cleansed it **and now rules it.**"

And the next day's entry:

"I really have felt an immense and new joy throughout today. It is the joy of being at peace with the world and of being in touch with God. How well do I know now **that he rules me** and that I never really knew him before...."

Every human being lives his life in service of someone or something. But we were made to serve the living God and in that service only men and women, boys and girls, come into the fulfillment of life and true freedom, the freedom to be what you were meant to be and what you crave to be, and to be **that** forever!

That is the first thing to say about Christians and a Christian church: they serve God; their lives are lived at his pleasure, to perform his will, to fulfill his purposes -- and they are glad for it!

II. The second thing said about the life of Christians is that it is a life of waiting.

Again, this is not something that, at first, seems attractive or commendable about the Christian life -- that so much of what it offers, what it promises, is still in the future and must be waited for. Paul says specifically that the Thessalonians were "waiting for the Lord to return from heaven." But in that waiting for the consummation of all things lies an entire lifetime of waiting of every kind.

The Lord promises us the conquest of our sin and our sinfulness, our sinful habits and practices that so darken, so stain, so corrupt and spoil our lives. But that deliverance -- though we have the firstfruits of it in the work the Holy Spirit is performing in us -- will not be complete in this life or this world. It awaits the day when we shall take our place among the spirits of just men made perfect and then finally the day of resurrection when we shall be made, body and soul, like the Lord Jesus because we shall see him as he is.

The Lord has further promised in the Gospel the vindication of his name and his cause in the world. A day is coming when the whole earth will know that Jesus is Lord and all will see the truth, but now vast multitudes ignore him and his Word or, worse, scorn him and mock the message about him that burns in Christian hearts.

How often the Scripture promises something such as this [Isa. 49:23]:

"Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who hope in me will not be disappointed."

But that day is not yet, Christians must wait for it.

And then, so much more waiting is required of us. So many things that we want, and have every right to want, yet the months and years pass and still God has not put them in our hands or hearts. He will, in his own time and his own way, but we must wait for him. So often and for so many things it is his will that we wait in hope so that patience may have its perfect work in us.

King David's beautiful words which open the 40th Psalm are almost a summation of Christian experience: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry." Christians get everything; in due time, they get it all -- but faith and hope must first be served and so first they wait for it.

In this waiting you find a great difference between a Christian and an unbeliever who wants what he wants now, who is short-sighted and all for the present. The Christian knows too well that other purposes are being served in the world beside his own gratification and happiness and he is confident that all will come good in the end, and so he waits.

Put these two things together: serving God and waiting and you have a distinctive life, very different from the lives of those who are not Christians and who have not embraced the message of the Word of God and the Gospel of Christ.

A good way for Christians and for Christian churches to examine themselves is to compare themselves to this concise formula of authentic Christianity. Are we like this?

You say: well the Christian life is more than this. I think other things could be mentioned, you say. And I agree with you. But by the Spirit of God the Apostle Paul chose to describe it succinctly in these two respects. Surely that means that **these things**, whatever else must be true of us, **these things must be front and center in our lives as Christians**.

Do I see myself and judge myself and direct my life and make my choices because I know myself to be and love to be the **servant of God**? Do I rise each morning to do his will and to find my pleasure in his pleasure. Do I believe that my freedom and my fulfillment will be found in being God's servant and that, paradoxically, the more a servant of God I am, the more I will know and feel myself to be God's beloved son or daughter.

And do I accept that much of what my heavenly Father and Christ my Savior have promised me in the Gospel I must wait for, sometimes all my life, and that by waiting I prove my confidence in my Father's Word and give him glory by counting upon his promises, however long delayed their fulfillment may be? And do I live my life in the confidence that all shall one day be mine and so I can wait patiently for it, endure the difficulties in the Lord's name, because I know they soon shall be no more? The heir of enormous wealth can stand a spell of poverty, for he knows what lies ahead. He can even smile in his poverty because of his knowledge of the grand reversal soon to come.

In Jim Elliot's diary, in an entry from his senior year at Wheaton College, seven years before his martyrdom in Ecuador, there is this entry:

"Prayed a strange prayer today. I covenanted with my Father that he would do either of two things -- either glorify himself to the utmost in me, or slay me. By his grace I shall not have his second best. For he heard me, I believe, so that now I have nothing to look forward to but a life of sacrificial sonship or heaven soon."

Or in other words, "Lord, I will wait for some things, but don't make me wait to be your most willing and faithful servant. I don't want to wait for that!" And the Lord didn't make him wait: either for a life of faithful service or for heaven.

And we would all do well, for the sake of the love of God, to ask of God the same thing for ourselves and for our life together: "Lord, we will wait willingly, patiently, cheerfully for much of what you have promised us, if only we do not have to wait for the grace we will need to be and to live as your most faithful servants. We place our earlobes against the doorpost of this house. Pierce them with your awl and make us your servants for life!"