

I. CHRIST'S HYPOCRITES

Scriptures: II Kings 17:35-41; John 13: 34-38.

Of all the charges which a minister or any Christian has to bear, the most painful is the accusation that he is a hypocrite. Let scoffers hint that the Christian is something less than bright. Let them express grave doubt about his mental stability. Let them profess to find in Jesus Christ the symptoms of serious nervous derangement; and we laugh, or are merely annoyed.

But let them say that we are pretentious two-faced hypocrites -- that we piously profess an attachment to the ways of the Kingdom of God, but show ourselves thoroughly at home in the kingdoms of this world -- that guys, because it has the sharpness of truth. That crushes, because it carries its own conviction.

The duplicity of our Christian life shows up clearly in the demonstrative emotion with which we celebrate the Christmas festival, and in the speed with which we recover from it. The Yuletide generosity of CHAPEL SERMONS people to the needy -- the expansive seasonal good-will which we manifest even toward our workaday rivals -- the sentimental and tender feeling with which we by again that incarnation of tenderness, the Christ-child -- these make Christmas an impressive outburst of the Christian spirit.

Professor Norvin Hein

But in retrospect it seems as if we had been merely seized with a passing whim to practice the virtues of our faith, and make the earth for one mad day the paradise of brotherhood it might be. The return to normalcy is swift. From commercialism, to Christmas, to commercialism again, we swing with the greatest of ease -- from concern for the needy to renewed defense of privilege, from "peace on earth good will toward men" back to our usual bellicose preoccupations. In England the abruptness of this transition is eased with a well-conceived alcoholic festival called Boxing Day. Falling on the first day after Christmas, it serves the useful function of sweeping from the heart and mind any remnants of unworldly and impracticable notions. But, one way or another, all of us accomplish this transition successfully. Ministers are not less clever than others. The January 28, 29, 1952 bear the chains of the marketplace, the egg-spots of commercialism. An amazing combination of selflessness and of calculation, on the one hand we turn down the wealth of a lifetime, on the other hand, we move heaven and earth to get into the path of an extra dollar a year. On the one hand we give up hope forever of rising to the heights in secular leadership; on the other, we struggle for positions of petty dignity and power. And now we love the chief seats at feasts, the salutations in the market-places! We see these things ourselves.

How much more can the non-Christian perceive than! In our Christmas protestations of devotion he suspects falsity. He cannot see the shame in our hearts, the glistening eye of contrition, which we hide, as we kneel before the manger of Bethlehem.

And if our personal Christianity sometimes seems a tawdry thing even to observers, how does the faith of Christendom look to far-away peoples who can judge the Christianity of nations only by their actions on the grand scale? Their comments on our Christmas piety -- sometimes muttered, Marquand Chapel, oftener said more audibly -- are in words like these:

Yale Divinity School

"What hypocrites these Christians are, these people of such high ideals, who claim to follow Jesus of Nazareth! The world groans under the wrongs they have done -- are still doing! Their lands are the one great portion of the globe in which a dark man still cannot live with dignity. Their churches are citadels of race consciousness. Their newspapers are full of the scandal and corruption of their public life. Their diplomats leap up in the United Nations to hurl livid-faced invective back upon their enemies, point by point. Their self-advertising propaganda covers the world. The possibility of settling the present world conflict by any but armed methods does not seem to be worthy of their notice. Even now they are melting down the precious resources of the entire world to make their weapons.

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"Yet they consider themselves the followers of the gentle Jesus, the Prince of Peace. On the anniversary of his birth they gather in their churches and sing:

Hark, the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the newborn king,
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.'

Excuse us if our laughter is sardonic! Let them have at least the virtue of consistency: Let them change their tune to harmonize with their practice:

Hark, the happy cannons roar,
'Glory to the conqueror!
Death and fear and peace defiled
and two worlds unreconciled!'
Sing hosanna, sing Noel,
Sing the gunner and the shell
Sing the candle, sing the lamp,
Sing the concentration camp....
Wreath the world with evergreen,
Praise the atom submarine,
Sing the barbed and bitter wire,
Atom bomb and liquid fire,
Rocket plane and hand grenade,
And the heart of man, afraid.
Christ is come, the light is risen,
All our critics safe in prison,
And the Christmas time begets
Twenty million bayonets."

(--Adapted from Phyllis McGinley, "Christmas Carol-1936" in Sat. Rev. of Lit.)

Now, here is a practical, down-to-earth suggestion.... a simple and sure way to cleanse ourselves of the stain of hypocrisy. If we cannot practice what we preach, we could at least preach what we practice. Hymning the praises of "the gunner and the shell", we could persist in all our present brutalities, and commit new ones as needed, with a clear conscience. Whatever else the world might call us, they would not call us hypocrites.

That's one way to end hypocrisy.

To leave hypocrisy behind, we might not even have to go quite so far. To escape the Law of Christ, one need not retreat to utter barbarity. An Arab sheikh, hearing a reading of the Sermon on the Mount one day, exclaimed, "Thank God I am not a Christian!" The sheikh's religion is an earthy ethical creed which produces very few hypocrites, because it is geared to the natural passions and inclinations of man. By taking refuge from duplicity in such a faith, or merely by subverting our own with casuistry, we could spare ourselves further embarrassment.

Yes, we could; but by the grace of God, any such move is quite beyond our power. Though we do wickedness, it is not in us really to believe in wickedness. We betray Jesus like Judas, but in our heart of hearts we know him, still, to be the Christ. With the writer of the Fourth Gospel we hear Jesus say, "Ye call me Teacher and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am."

Exchanging the Christian gospel for a lesser gospel will not free us from the jurisdiction of the Gospel, and we know it! Christ's Sermon on the Mount is not merely The New Law, but The Eternal Law. We may vainly imagine that the requirements of our peace are something lesser, something else. Regardless of what we think He is our peace. The love of Christ must dominate our social relations or we must suffer the

wages of sin. "Before the Cross of Jesus our lives are judged today", and the wages of sin we do suffer, again and again.

But let us thank God that we ARE Christian -- that we know, at least, the standard by which men are judged -- that we know how far we yet are from the perfection of God, and how much we stand in need of forgiveness.

Let us avoid at least the unforgivable sin -- that of calling wrong right, and right wrong, and distorting the divine commands to conform to our corrupt desires and enfeebled powers. When one suggests we abandon Christ for some more "realistic" teacher, we can only turn to Christ and say, "To whom can we go? Thou hast the world of eternal life!"

What then of our standing shame? Shall we cling to Christ even though we do not obey his word -- by all realistic forecast shall not obey it, save in the most pathetically partial manner? If we neither obey our ideal nor evade our ideal, what can we be called but hypocrites?

Rather than commit the greater hypocrisy of pretending to have pulled heaven down into our mire -- rather than worship a god manufactured for our convenience, instead of GOD -- let us suffer ourselves to be called any name under Heaven. Yes, let us confess our failure before God and man, that we are hypocrites. But let us be the frankest and most contrite of all two-faced people who ever proclaimed one gospel and acted on another. Let us be the most untiring, the most earnestly aspiring of all servants whose foremost quality is their disobedience. Let us ever stretch our hands, though sullied, toward Him who is the true Lord of our lives.

Let us be Christ's hypocrites. And glory in it:
He has use even for such!

Let us pray.

We thank Thee, Lord, that thou has seen fit to reveal to us the completeness of Thy moral perfection, not tempering the truth to our weakness, but making known the awful fulness of our duty.

May we have the wisdom to know our shortcomings, humility to confess them. Save us from hankering after peace of conscience which is not peace with Thee and with our fellow-man.

Support us with courage to struggle against any odds, confident of Thy ultimate goodness and mercy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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THE TEST OF CONFLICT

Scripture: Matt. 5: 45b-48; and from Thomas a-Kempis, The Imitation of Christ:

"Behold how far off thou art yet from true charity and humility, which knoweth not how to be angry with any, or to be moved with indignation but only against its own self.

"It is no great matter to associate with the good and gentle; for this is naturally pleasing to all, and everyone willingly enjoyeth peace, and loveth those best that agree with him.

"But to be able to live peaceably with hard, and perverse, or undisciplined persons, is a great grace, and an exceedingly commendable and manly deed."

As our year here in the fellowship of the school swings into mid-passage, we begin to get insight into the personality and character of the people with whom we live and work. In some cases, a very profound insight.

The honeymoon is over; the party is finished. We no longer take party manners at their face value.

Now, it is a well-known fact that Christians love one another; by this, all men know that we are his disciples -- that we love one another. But we love some more than others -- and some a little less. To put it more plainly, we find some people whose effect on us can be likened unto "a continual drop-dropping on a very rainy day." And so we often move about muttering inchoate things within ourselves which we dare not formulate into words. If we were clever enough, we would devise some paraphrase -- in Christian language, of course, but equally effective to to Browning's Soliloquy in the Spanish Cloister:

"At the meal we sit together:
..... I must hear
Wise talk of the kind of weather,
Sort of season, time of year:

What? Your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
Oh, that rose has prior claim....
Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
HELL DRY YOU UP WITH ITS FLAMES!"

At last there comes a time when we must acknowledge what we can't conceal, even from ourselves, by any amount of verbal pussy-footing and prudery -- the fact of CONFLICT. Despite the ideally non-competitive situation in which we live, the idyllic churches and other institutions in which we work, we find ourselves involved in outright clash. When we are frank with our confidants, we confess that we have our own little list, of people "who surely wouldn't be missed."

Now, what are we going to do about it?

The first thing which we do do, is to turn the resources of our ingenuity toward demonstrating how normal -- and even how providential, and beneficial to the Christian cause -- it is that we should have occasional open conflicts with some people:

There's a refreshing honesty about a person who tells another precisely what he thinks; there's a certain wholesome catharsis that's effected by blowing one's top -- it's a cleansing experience which has an integrating effect on the personality.

A man of character must stand for something in this world -- and against something. This involves inevitable collisions with people who stand for something else. The distinction of the Christian is that he stands for the right things. To be at daggers drawn with the people who stand for the wrong things is actually a credit to a man. A Christian can be known by the kind of enemies he keeps: seef-seeking men -- uncooperative crossgrained obstructive fellows -- reactionary people: the real Pharisees and vipers of our time.

Mixing it with someone in a fly-around is admittedly not a sign of angelic character; but it is a well-known fact that all men without distinction fall short of the Glory of God. Holy Scripture can be shown to emphasize this, that all men fall short of the glory of God. The emphasis should be put on the all. Is there anything so exceptional or so balmeworthy, then, in the fact that we are not willing to suffer fools gladly, beyond a certain point?

And although getting involved in these brushes is not quite ideal, and I might be said to fall short of the glory of God, one must remember what a feather it is in my cap that even in these circumstances I never fall as far short of the glory of God as other men do -- whom I could mention. I think twice about everything I say. I constantly keep my temper curbed, avoiding the coarse language which some people use. I take up the cudgels only on some perfectly justifiable ground. In the exchange of views which follows, I limit myself to pointing out certain objective and incontrovertible facts, documenting my sources. Finally, my only motive in precipitating these unpleasant situations in the first place is my neighbor's better interests: someone must accept the burden of pointing out to him certain weaknesses of his; otherwise how will he become a better man?

All in all, we are confident that our social set would bear us out in our confidence that we are a fairly amiable and cooperative person. With nine out of ten people I live and work in perfect Christian harmony. Almost every person with whom I have ever had dealings would bear testimony to that.

Except a few: I have been thrown in with some difficult persons in my time -- people who, if I do say so, have not the slightest understanding of what Christian standards of behaviour are, and no intention of governing themselves by Christian principles: And who could, or should get along with them?

All of which is to say, that it is very meritorious of us not to have quarreled with those with whom we have no differences, and that there is nothing shameful in our quarrelling with those with whom we have real bones to pick. This line of reasoning was made perfectly transparent by Thomas Carlyle, who was something less than an angel of light on occasion, and knew it. With sly insight, he justified himself in these words:

"You may hear it said of me that I am cross-grained and disagreeable; dinna believe it! Only let me have my own way in everything, with all about me precisely as I wish, and a sunnier and pleasanter creature does not exist."

Both Carlyle and ourselves will agree that this would make a somewhat questionable standard for Christian sainthood. Are you all sunshine under these circumstances? The publicans are! Yet this is the standard by which we ordinarily canonize ourselves and enter our names in the catalog of saints.

It can be maintained, with reason, that in the mostly-pleasant, usually-unbelligerent person the Christian life has not yet begun. Nine-tenths of our relationships, at least, are with reasonably just persons -- or with persons whose unjust ideas correspond with our own. With just men the Christian will of course be just -- but he has not yet needed to be a Christian. To govern such naturally harmonious relationships, the ethics of the Old Testament would do perfectly well -- or the ethics of almost any other religion, save that of indiscriminating cannibals. On such levels the peculiar resources of Christianity are not called into play. It is on the hostile frontiers of our social relations, where we are up against people who do not belong to our sweet circle -- up against people who disagree with us both in interests and in evaluations -- that the principles of the Christian religion have their natural field of application. When the picnic-wagon of sunny-day Christianity comes bang up against the rocks put in the path by those who will not play the game -- this is not where the usefulness of Christianity ends; this is where the truly Christian life begins. Here the Christian has made his bow, and his tricks begin to count. The unpleasant man is the test of the Christian individual, and the disagreeable nation is the test of the Christian nation. For Christianity as a social religion deals, above all, with that ever-present factor in human life: CONFLICT; and it is in relation to conflict that the Christian may be expected to show the special colours of a unique creed. The Christian begins to score as a Christian if he can apply, then, something of Christianity's revolutionary way of dealing with conflicts.

What is this Christian attitude in conflicts?

The natural man, involved in conflict, says, "Let this struggle end in my victory, in the crushing of these disagreeable and obstructive persons. Let there be the elation of a victor and the degradation of a loser here, and let the loser be someone other than myself."

And then, there is an enlightened theist upon whose mind has dawned an intellectual realization of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. This man is not necessarily a Christian. He sees that brotherhood is not tribal, selective; all whom God has seen fit to create are brethren, all conflicts of men are family differences, to be settled in a manner in keeping with the affection of brothers. In the white light of intelligence he sees all ruthless strife as something unnatural and improper. He says to the bristling combatant, "Tut tut, now, now, here here!" This is not proper. End this unseemly quarrelling!" The power by which the raging torrent of hatred is to be reversed does not appear, now does our theist seem to consider this question to be in his field.

On the Christian, an active obligation is laid by the example and spirit of his Master, who broke down the middle wall of partition between men, and abolished in his flesh their enmity. It is for the Christian to say, "Let this conflict find its end through my determination that it shall not be -- by my projection of myself into my neighbor's place, by my consideration of his needs, by my consecrated study of all the factors economic or psychological which incite this conflict -- by my tireless perseverance, and if necessary by my sacrifice; -- for my brother's recognition of brotherhood is more important than my victory."

"He drew a circle which shut me out --
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But Love and I had the wit to win --
We drew a circle which took him in!"

--Edwin Markham

Christian social strategy requires the extension of brotherhood particularly in those situations where the feeling is not reciprocated. "It is no great matter to associate with the good and gentle; for this is naturally pleasing to all.... But to be able to live peaceably with hard, and perverse, or undisciplined persons, is a great grace, and an exceedingly commendable and manly deed."

Let us pray: Almighty God, our Father-Creator, we confess before thee, now our dislikes. We remember those children of thine whose brotherhood we have denied, by word or deed. We remember with regret those hatreds and antagonisms of our world for whose solution we have ceased to lift a finger.

Let there be a re-birth in us of the spirit of compassion that was in Christ. May we so cherish his memory, so honor his word, that he may perform in us and through us his healing miracles of old, and heal us of our strifes. In his name. Amen.