

The Passionate Christian Life

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Part One: The Christian and His Passions

The Christian life is a passionate, emotion-filled life. Progression in holiness is less a matter of suppressing emotions than directing them. Orientation rather than strict control represents the attitude of the mature Christian towards his whole person as he lives out being Christ in the world. This healthy attitude towards what man is and the individual gifts each person has is never more prominently taught than in the Holy Scriptures, particularly the New Testament. A turn to the New Testament, then can indicate how the passions are to be considered in the context of the Christian life. We will restrict ourselves to the Acts of the Apostles, the Letters, and the Book of Revelation. However, before examining the New Testament writings just mentioned, there should be a brief description of what is meant by "passions."

Few men need to be told that they have passions. Hardly a moment in man's life goes by when he does not feel a craving or sense the completion or fulfillment of some desire. In fact, we each run the whole gambit of the emotional life in the simple process of trying to buy a milk shake on a hot day. It is important to emphasize that the passions are not something separate from man, the pure "man" residing as it were in the body but not part of the whole of his activities. Rather they are the reasons for man's instinctive pressure towards or withdrawal from the objects and events in the world about him. In short, the passions are basic movements that we can feel take place within us but which concern something taking place outside our own being. They are our contact with reality apart from us. These movements cover the widest possible range of drives, from anger, hate, fear, power, to love, joy, the need for possessions, the overwhelming desire to be loved. All of these are passions, and all of them can be an intimate part of the joyful Christian life, a life of completeness.

Consequently the passions point to either an existence of wants or are factors of completion for the same wants. They are capable of being "Christianized" because they are "outer-directed"; their fulfill-



ment is occasioned from without man. By their directing us toward immersion in the *other* within the situations of daily life, they help us toward the ultimate goal of charity. And by their withdrawing us from what we feel to be instinctively evil, they can help us in attaining the beauty of a good, God-and-man directed life. With these brief considerations behind us, we are now able to delve into our investigation of the New Testament writings themselves.

The General Teaching of The New Testament

Let me put it like this: if you are guided by the Spirit you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence, since self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit, the Spirit is totally against such a thing, and it is precisely because the two are so opposed that you do not always carry out your good intentions. If you are led by the Spirit, no law can touch you. When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: fornication, gross indecency and sexual irresponsibility; idolatry and sorcery; feuds and wrangling, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels; disagreements, factions, envy; drunkenness, orgies and similar things. I warn you now, as I warned you before: those who behave like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal. 5:16ff)

This short passage sums up the whole Christian attitude toward the passions. Paul clearly sets down this attitude here. The key conceptions of this attitude cannot be underscored enough, for they appear again and again in his writings. The "Spirit" is the power of Christ, directing all things back to the Father. It makes us the adopted sons of God. Self-indulgence and the Spirit are seen as direct contraries; one cannot serve two masters. We can be directed either back to the Father through the power of the Spirit, or directed towards ourselves. A notion of freedom is implied therefore, for one who indulges in the activities leading away from God is a slave to himself and to his lower calling, while one guided by the Spirit is able to inherit the kingdom of God. The latter, the true Christian, is set free from being caught up only in himself, and ultimately from death. It is easy to see, then, that the kerygma announced in this passage is the kingdom of God. This is the call, the reason for our response. What we want to do in return, our response, is to inherit this kingdom freely, through the impetus of the Spirit.

It would be a tragic mistake to think that the self-indulgence which

St. Paul berates is to be identified with the inclinations of our body. If read in this erroneous fashion, the passage then would seem to counsel domination and control over all of our feelings, stomping on them whenever they appear. The Christian life would result in masterful self-control. But it would still be inward-directed. It would be man-made control, not God-directed control. Man would be viewed as a disembodied "I", frigidly free from his body, and incidentally, from all that is human and beautiful.

A proper understanding of the text tells us this: the activities of self-indulgence should not be identified with the passions themselves. Such activities war against the Spirit and our own freedom by being *excessive* uses of the passions for the *wrong end*. As will be seen further on, the passions may also be used in moderation for the right end, lending fullness to the Christian life. This latter reading of the text is as we would suspect, remembering Christ's admonition to love "with our whole minds and with our whole hearts and with all our strength."

Of course, St. Paul's list of the activities of self-indulgence is not exhaustive. It is only meant to remind his readers that these are the activities in which pagans indulge. Therefore they are at once beneath the dignity and freedom of the children of the Spirit who live in the hope of inheriting the full reward of the kingdom of God.

It is not an easy task to describe all the passages dealing with the passions in the sections of the New Testament we have chosen. There is no orderly presentation there, for the writers were not concerned with a systematized philosophy of the moral life. Nevertheless, our investigation will follow the pattern of "positive" and "negative". In the discussion of the passions we will note the negative attitude of the writer towards the passions seems to be only one side of the Christian coin. The frequent "don't do as the pagans do!" are balanced by the positive stress of the passions. Again we should hardly be surprised at this, for Christ our model was a passionate man. As a result, the Christian can rest assured that the feelings and drives he has are capable of being quite christic.

We would suggest a reason for the dual attitude toward the passions in the New Testament. The Christian life is continually presented as one of gratitude. Our thankfulness to the Father is a guiding principle of our moral life. What is there to be thankful for? The New Testament indicates at least two answers to this question. The Christian is thankful to God for rescuing him from the powers of darkness. For this reason he releases himself from the tenacious hold of the

powers of darkness by directing the forces of his being toward God. But more importantly, the Christian is also thankful for God for establishing him in a new life. From this gratitude results the positive attitude towards the passions. God is glorified by the whole man, passionately acting as an entire unity of praise to God. Between the dialectic of positive and negative attitudes, of fullness and negation, lie the virtues. Consequently the virtues are seen as forms of gratitude as well. They are offerings of the whole man to God for his "unutterable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15).

We have just mentioned the place of the virtues. Yet it is also hard to distinguish the virtues from the proper use of the passions. Most often they are both identified in the New Testament. However, St. Paul aids us here. At first it appears that the life of the Spirit is a newness which not only transforms man but creates him anew. The stamp of goodness is forged into man. Nevertheless there is some separation between the virtues and our passions. As the passage quoted initially indicates, the Spirit and self-indulgence are opposed. This we may take as the opposition between God and sin, between the supernatural and our own natural inclinations. But the Spirit speaks to our spirit as well. Spirit with a small "s" is properly understood as a faculty ingrafted in us by God. Hence there must be some separation between what we are and what the Spirit grants us. Self-indulgence, conceived by Paul, still wars within us but is superseded by the Spirit's gifts to us. Thus the Christian has at least a self-direction and the gift of a greater direction. The passions then are not to be identified either with self-indulgence nor with the spirit, but are directed by one or the other.

In our discussion, we will also try to point out the kerygma which governs both the negative and positive attitudes towards the passions. Briefly, the kerygma is the doctrinal message proclaimed for obedience and the *didaché* is man's response to the proclamation in terms of some further teaching or elaboration. We have already noted the response of gratitude which constitutes the moral force of the Christian life. But response to what? The answer to this question establishes the overall kerygma of the New Testament. This kerygma governs the whole life of the Christian, and therefore regulates the use of the passions as well.

The universal kerygma or proclamation we are seeking concerns the mystery of Godliness (I Tim. 3:16). It proclaims that the kingdom of heaven is with us on earth. What the "good news" is, then, is that God is actually concerned with us in our situation, with the salvation of all men. In Christ Jesus through the Spirit, God has been gracious enough

to make this concern effective. As we saw earlier anyone who indulges like the pagan in the unlawful use of the passions, "running wild" as he pleases, will never inherit the kingdom of heaven. He is a slave to his lower nature. As such the loss of the kingdom promised to us is the best negative reason for not allowing the passions to direct our life but rather to place them under the guidance of the Spirit within us.

In a positive vein St. Paul places the whole origin of the *proper* use of the passions in the fact of man's *new knowledge* of the true God. The proper use of the passions is identified, as we have said, with a virtuous life under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. In view of St. Paul's emphasis, surprising as it may seem, upon knowledge as the first norm in guiding our moral life, the origin of all moral perversion would then have to lie in the failure to live up to this new knowledge. Failing to recognize the true God who is Wisdom itself (Rom 1:18ff) is a serious and damning neglect: "And as they resolved against having a good knowledge of God, God has given them up to a seared conscience so that they do what is morally disgraceful." The call to be responsible for this new knowledge is frequently found in the New Testament, as in the following admonition for instance: "Live life, then, with a due sense of responsibility, not as men who do not know the meaning and purpose of life but *as those who do!*" (Eph 5:15). This is a repeated contrast. We are constantly shown the dichotomy between the animalistic way of acting under the old knowledge and the truly spiritual use of the passions as a result of new knowledge (e.g.: 2 Pet. 2ff).

In the light of the revealed knowledge of a good God who saves us, the grateful moral response must differ in principle from the life issuing from ordinary ethics. Ethics requires only an intellectual adherence; it is largely anthropocentric in tone, dealing as it does with the happiness of man. But the Christian moral life is something entirely different. Stemming from obedience to new knowledge and characteristically theocentric in tone, this moral life demands a total adherence, not merely of the mind, but of the whole person. In other words the kerygma of God's perfection and love should produce a response of an impeccable and beautiful life. In short, the guide of the moral life for the Christian is: *professing truth in charity*. The new being is able to make such a profession in charity because of the superior knowledge which has been granted him: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for giving us through Christ every possible spiritual benefit as citizens of Heaven! For consider what he has done—before the foundation of the world he chose us to become,

in Christ, his holy and blameless children living within his constant care" (Eph. 1:3ff).

An additional reason for properly directing the passions is an outgrowth of the doctrine set down already. Man has the Spirit within him and should therefore act as one "of the Spirit." The fact that the Spirit resides within us is closely linked with the kerygma of superior knowledge we have been discussing. Man alone could not conceive what is on God's mind. Unaided he would not know why God is operating for his sake. Indeed, man could not respond to this superior knowledge, even if he wanted to, without some interior help. St. Paul considered this fundamental need for help to be experientially verified. He had lived under the Old Law and yet he found that it simply served to increase concupiscence to sin, as it did not bestow some interior aid helping man to obey it (Rom. 7:5-10; 5:20). What is of importance for us is that the Spirit is given *within* us, transforming us to Christ and elevating our knowledge of the meaning of life. We can see this doctrine taught in three magnificent texts which follow: But God has, through the Spirit, let us share his secret. For nothing is hidden from the Spirit, not even the deep wisdom of God. For who could really understand a man's inmost thoughts except the spirit of the man himself? How much less could anyone understand the thoughts of God except the very Spirit of God? And the marvelous thing is this, that we now receive not the spirit of the world but the Spirit of God himself, so that we can actually understand something of God's generosity toward us . . . But the unspiritual man simply cannot accept the matters which the Spirit deals with—they just don't make sense to him, for, after all, you must be spiritual to see spiritual things. The spiritual man, on the other hand, has an insight into the meaning of everything, though his insight may baffle the man of the world. This is because the former is sharing in God's wisdom . . . Incredible as it may sound, we who are spiritual have the very thoughts of Christ! (I Cor. 2:10-3:1)

But when the kindness of God our savior and his love toward man appeared, he saved us in his mercy—not by virtue of any moral achievements of ours, but by the cleansing power of a new birth, and moral renewal of the Holy Spirit, which he gave us so generously through Jesus Christ our Savior (Tit. 3:4). When I think of the greatness of this great plan, I fall on my knees before the Father . . ., and I pray that out of the glorious richness of his resources he will enable you to know the strength of the Spirit's inner reinforcement . . . And I pray that you, firmly fixed in love yourselves, may be able to grasp

. . . how wide and deep and long and high is the love of Christ—and how to know for yourselves that love so far beyond our comprehension. May you be filled through all your being with God himself! (Eph. 3:14ff)

From these texts it should be abundantly clear that there are two reasons making possible our grateful response. First there is the superior knowledge (surpassing our wildest hopes!) about God's action with men, and secondly there is the interior help of the Holy Spirit. With such superior knowledge and such aid from the Holy Spirit, we cannot possibly act like the pagans who allow themselves to run rampant. We are now "new beings", children of the loving God who demands that we be perfect (Eph. 1:4). The sinful passions are productive only of death and slavery (Rom. 7:5), whereas the Spirit's control of them results in life. Therefore control of the passions and their proper direction is a twofold sign. On the one hand we must have a special treasury in a new knowledge of God (I Th. 4:5), and on the other hand the Spirit is surely within us.

Parenthetically we should mention another kerygma which guides the moral response of Apostles. As one of the faithful the Apostle or disciple is governed by the general kerygma of the mystery of Godliness developed above (I Tim. 3:16). However his conduct must also conform to the additional responsibilities he has in serving the Church. By his very name apostle (meaning messenger-ambassador), he is seen to be a present representative through whom the power of God comes to men. Because of his consecration to the Church he must be outstanding in holiness.

The reason for this demand for excellence stems from the dignity of the Church. The House of God is of such a dignity that the priest-apostle must image it. The Church itself has a twofold dignity: an assembly consecrated to God and a custodian of God's grace. This *sanctity of the Church*, then, is the apostolic norm. Its sanctity compels the apostle to be faithful in his twofold action of receiving the message and conveying it to others. In order to be effective in this double task, St. Paul counsels him to cleanse himself. In this way the apostle can make public confession of the faith and represent God in the world. Cleansing makes him available "for every good work" (2 Tim. 2:20). "Turning [his] back on the turbulent desires of youth," the apostle approaches God in sincerity (2 Tim. 2:22). In sum, then, the kerygma governing the apostle is the sanctity of the Church. The Church can be seen both as the Body of Christ, or his visible extension, that is, the collection of members in God's household. The re-

sponse of the apostle or of anyone living the apostolic life is cleansing or directing the passions away from youthful pursuits and toward God.

This then is the general teaching or norm for governing the passions as expressed in the New Testament. In the next issue we will have an opportunity to examine the individual passions in detail, especially those of love and hate, joy and fear. The overall point to remember is that the Christian life is *directional* and not as is frequently supposed, inhibitional. We do not cease being human by Christian control. Rather we direct our lives in a mature fashion, in accordance with the plan of God for the salvation and transformation of the whole earth.

