

THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE

INTRODUCTION

In Philippians 3:10-11, the apostle Paul longs for a death that conforms to Christ's in order to greater experience the Lord he had previously "gained." In addition, Paul set his affections (see Col. 3:1-11) on the resurrection power of God and a sharing in the very sufferings of Christ. What of the power that raised Jesus from the dead (Eph. 1:19-20)?

- It requires such power to reckon ourselves as dead to sin and risen to a new life in Christ (Rom. 6:5-14).
- It requires such power to live each day as separated unto Christ (Gal. 2:20).

Paul appears to have lived each day in terms of finality (1 Cor. 15:31). In 2 Timothy 4:6-8, though unknowingly, Paul faced his final moments and gave a grand summation (a benediction) of how he lived his life every day since his conversion.

We are tempted to discount such lofty ideals as apostolic. We are tempted to exclude such living from our reach due to its goal of being like Christ. Yet to do so is to deny our identity, our power and our life's mission. To do so is to rob needy souls of a living encounter with the living Christ. To do so is to abandon the call of the **normal** Christian life.

What is meant by the use of the term "normal?" The word itself implies a universally accepted standard. For example, Webster renders the primary meaning, "not deviating from an established norm, rule, or principle." Hence, something that is standard, regular, or natural is said to be "normal."

- We can say of a person that he or she is a carnal Christian, embodying a life that is under the influence of the lower affections, and inclined toward self-gratification. But does being carnal reflect the standard for being a Christian?
- We can also say of a person that he or she is a spiritual Christian, under the influence of the Spirit's filling presence, and sharing oneness in fellowship with the affections, attitudes and actions of Christ. But does being "spiritual" by this definition constitute the standard for Christian living?

- Many would be tempted to compromise here, especially if such a life is not part of their experience. They might suggest what has become all too common among the saints of God, a median expression of Christianity that is an admixture of the two. This is little more than a consensus definition, one that is relative to the prevailing spiritual climate of our age.
- In so doing, such persons would regard the biblical definition as exceptional and beyond the grasp of the "normal" Christian. In fact, such persons may despise as pious the lofty pursuits of the dedicated Christian, being offended by godliness unknown to their experience.
- Such persons would draw a continuum with "carnal" and "spiritual" as the opposing poles (antipodes) with various gradations of devotedness in between. Someone who is "off center" in either direction, then, tends toward "carnality" or "spirituality."
- However, this would make the center of the continuum the "normal" Christian life, or, vacillation between the flesh and the Spirit in some kind of spiritual tug of war.
 - Paul described such a life in Romans 7:13-25 as a postscript to his teaching on being "dead to sin" and "alive to God" in Romans 6:1-23 and as a prelude to his teaching on the victorious life "in the Spirit" in Romans 8:1-39.
 - What Paul seems to be describing in Romans 7:13-25 (especially switching suddenly to the 1st person in v. 15) is the best that one can hope for in terms of living the Christian life according to the flesh ("carnal").
 - This experience leaves the saint much as Paul, describing his own wretchedness and complete dependence upon Christ (vv. 24-25).
 - Is this descriptive of a "crisis" encounter with God, one that serves as a stepping stone for advancing one's depth of spiritual experience?
 - Paul is not suggesting that the struggle depicted in 7:15-20 is the "normal" Christian life, but he is revealing that the conclusions of 7:24-25 reflect the "standard" for Christian living.
 - I must repeatedly come to an end of myself in order to live the "normal" Christian life (Matt. 16:24; Gal. 2:20).

- We rightly call out to God for a season of “revival” and for God to reveal Himself in our midst (Hab. 3:2).
 - Yet, God points us to the life He has determined for us all to live, the “normal” Christian life (Jn. 10:10). Any other life bears the obligation of confession to God for living far below our potential (Lk. 5:9; Rom. 7:24).
- In Romans 8:9, Paul described two spheres of dominion where every human being resides. A person is either “in the flesh” and condemned before God, or he is “in the Spirit” and rightly related to God (see also 1 Cor. 1:18).
 - The condemned person, whose life is characterized as being “in the flesh,” knows absolutely nothing of the Spirit of God (i.e., by experience) and His gracious influences and abiding presence (1 Cor. 2:14).
 - Yet, the saved person, whose life is characterized as being “in the Spirit,” is capable of living a spiritual life because of the resident power and presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6-16).
 - See verse 12, what we have always possessed and what we have received that now constitutes a most radical change and the Means for living a radically distinct life from the world.
 - This in fact is the standard, nothing more, nothing less. If there is a “deeper” life in Christ, or a “higher” life in Christ, such depths and heights are achieved within the context of a “spiritual” life, the normal Christian life. That is, you get "there" from "here."
 - If “those who are in the flesh” (or the lost) “cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8), then how can “fleshly” believers please Him in their attempts to live the Christian life? This is the crux of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4.

Now, if we introduce the word "sanctification" at this point, the eyebrows may furl as the mind struggles to compute what seems to be an irrelevant theological concept. While it is true that we ought not to present the Christian life as a complicated maze of secret passageways, we must recognize that the disciplines and dynamics of Christian living are complex.

The words “disciplines” and “dynamics” identify the Christian life as something to be actively engaged. Therefore, the doctrine of sanctification is necessary for several reasons.

I. IT IS NECESSARY BECAUSE IT IS BIBLICAL:

The family of words translated “sanctify” (v., ἀγιαζω) or “sanctification” (n., ἀγιασμοῦ) or “holy” (adj., ἅγιος), or even “sanctuary” (ἀγίον) and “saints” (ἅγιοι) appear more than 800 times in the AV and each conveys the notion of actively “setting apart” something, or passively being “set apart” by someone.

- A. Since God is holy by nature, whatever (whoever) He “sets apart” as His own possession must be made clean (e.g., see the reaction of Isaiah in Isa. 6:5 and consider the declaration of the John the Baptist in Jn. 1:29).
- B. Since a sinner is thoroughly (completely) defiled (Rom. 3:10-12, 23), God must perform a new birth to accomplish a resulting state of absolute perfection (note that the religious reformation of Nicodemus did not qualify him for a relationship with God, Jn. 3:3, 7). This amounts to a re-birth from above.
- C. The resulting state of “newness” and absence from defilement is based upon a union with the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our righteousness and our perfection (Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:17).
- D. When Jesus demanded “perfection” from his audience during the Sermon on the Mount, it was predicated on righteousness that He Himself would provide through faith (Matt. 5:48; Rom. 1:17; see 2 Cor. 5:21).

II. IT IS NECESSARY BECAUSE IT IS PRACTICAL:

If believers are to engage the process of living in accordance with our union with Christ (or, commonly, “living out what God has accomplished within”), we may do so in concert with the Holy Spirit who has taken up residence as the Agent of holiness.

- A. In our Lord’s Vine-branches-husbandman analogy of the Christian life (Jn. 15:1-8), the sap that flows from the Vine and fills the fruit-yielding branches is the Holy Spirit (note, the substantial balance of the Upper Room Discourse concerns the Holy Spirit, Jn. 13-17).
- B. By examining the singular “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22) we can evaluate our abiding and yielding in terms of conformity to the Spirit’s yielding (Gal. 5:25).

III. IT IS NECESSARY BECAUSE IT IS INTEGRAL:

- A. If we were to entertain a biological analysis of our physical bodies we would discover that there are numerous processes at work, converting energy, replicating cells, strengthening immunity to fend off viral attacks, with most of the processes going undetected and for the most part we are unconscious of them until we disobey the “disciplines” and “dynamics” regarding the care of the body.
- B. Yet, what of attendance to spiritual matters? Are there not similar processes at work? “Sanctification” is a comprehensive term that describes the manifold processes involved in the spiritual performance of Christian living.
 - 1. Is fasting for the body, or does it admit a deeper spiritual concern (Ps. 35:13)?
 - 2. Is not prayer grounded in the mystical communion of the child of God and his/her heavenly Father (Jer. 33:3)?
 - 3. Is faith defined by what is seen, or does it trust in what is known to be present, though absent from sight (Rom. 4:18; 2 Cor. 4:18; 5:7; Heb. 11:1-2)?
 - 4. Are we not in a battle with unseen principalities and powers with which we wrestle (Eph. 6:10-18)?
 - 5. We set our sights on heaven, though having never been there, possessing a foretaste of its glory in the Spirit (2 Cor. 5:1-5).
 - 6. We yearn for a deeper and fuller expression of the life we have become through the new birth, but grapple with the processes necessary to realize its experience (Rom. 7:24-25; 8:22-25).

IV. IT IS NECESSARY BECAUSE IT IS FOUNDATIONAL:

It rests upon the merits of other doctrines, such as regeneration (Tit. 3:5) and role of the Holy Spirit in our growth and development in Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). We enter the Christian life at the moment of our salvation, but this salvation serves as a foundation for life in the family of God.

- A. For example, the apostle Paul uses the analogy of a foundation with a superstructure when he describes the relation between the believer and his/her dependence upon Christ.
- B. In 1 Corinthians 3:5-15, Paul notes that Jesus Christ is the foundation of the believer’s life, the One who represents our security and support (v. 11).
- C. The task of the believer is to build upon the foundation (v. 10).

- D. The materials used for building are either cheap-perishable (“wood, hay, straw”) or valuable-imperishable (“gold, silver, precious stones”), v. 12.
- E. The laborer (Christian) works in concert with God (v. 9). As God’s “building” and God’s “field,” it is He that is also working on us. In other words, we are on the one hand a “finished product” (Eph. 2:10), but on the other hand we are a project in the making.
- F. The completed portion of the project is the Foundation (Christ). Yet, our present work for Christ must be performed with a view to His testing our lifetime achievement, in other words, is my labor consistent with Foundation...

- 1. performed in His name (Jn. 14:12-14; 16:23-24)?
- 2. under His Sovereign authority (Matt. 28:18)?
- 3. according to the power of the Spirit (Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:8)?
- 4. accomplished with a pure heart (Lk. 11:33-36, by application with reference to our motives)?
- 5. according to the Scriptures (Jn. 15:3, 7; 17:17)?
- 6. in harmony with the will of God (Acts 16:6-7)?
- 7. intended for His glory (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17)?

V. IT IS NECESSARY BECAUSE IT IS EXPERIENTIAL:

What if the appeal of the Psalmist in 51:13 were rendered “the spirit of your holiness” as some scholars suggest? We would have ground then for a passionate sense of devotion to God that pants for holiness as the deer the satisfying streams (Ps. 41:1-2).

VI. IT IS NECESSARY BECAUSE IT’S REASONABLE:

The apostle Paul identified “worship” in terms of deliberate daily acts of “placing” our lives “beside” the altar of sacrifice based upon acceptability to God (Rom. 12:1).

- A. Since God has made us holy through a union with His Son, we are to live holy lives by consciously choosing His will and His way over that of our own (see also 1 Pet. 1:13-16).
- B. Paul was alluding to the Old Testament sacrificial system and its standard offerings. Each offering had a definite purpose and reflected a deliberate act of worship. The offering could be rejected if was inferior in quality or presented by one whose heart did not reflect devotion to God (Mal. 1:9-14; see also Acts 5:1-11).

- C. Since we have been made holy and acceptable “offerings” to God, it is reasonable (logical) to “offer” ourselves.
1. Why would we withhold from God what He delights in receiving, namely ourselves (2 Cor. 8:5)?
 2. Additionally, in making the “offering” do we not at the same time comprehend its entire consumption?
 - a. The “burnt offering” was a freewill offering that involved the worshipper placing their hands on the animal’s head as an act of identification, before killing the animal, skinning it, then offering it whole to be consumed by fire (Lev. 1:4-6, 9). This was the most common sacrifice.
 - b. Paul regarded his own life as being “poured out” as a “drink offering” unto the Lord (2 Tim. 4:6). The “drink offering” accompanied the “burnt offering” (Num. 15:1-10) and provided a pleasing aroma when poured out on the altar and consumed entirely by the fire.
 - c. In the days of Elijah, the children of Israel were convoluted and divided in their worship. The prophet’s desire was the restoration of the people with one heart in devotion to God. The imagery of the broken down altar is symbolic of the unattended Christian life, one that requires rebuilding and rededication with a corresponding consummation by the Spirit of God (see 1 Ki. 18:30-39).

Conclusion

“Sanctification means intense concentration on God’s point of view. It means every power of body, soul, and spirit is chained and kept for God’s purpose only. It will cause an intense narrowing of all our interests on earth, and an immense broadening of all our interests in God. Are we prepared for God to do all in us that He separated us for? The reason some of us have not entered into the experience of sanctification is that we have not realized its meaning from God’s standpoint. Sanctification means being made one with Jesus so that the disposition that ruled Him will rule us. Jesus has prayed that we might be one with Him as He is one with the Father. The one and only characteristic of the Holy Spirit in a person is a strong family likeness to Jesus Christ and freedom from everything that is unlike Him” (Oswald Chambers).

The Scottish preacher John McNeill liked to tell about an eagle that had been captured when it was quite young. The farmer who snared the bird put a restraint on it so it couldn’t fly, and then he turned it loose to roam in the barnyard. It wasn’t long till the eagle began to act like the chickens, scratching and pecking at the ground. This bird that once soared high in the heavens seemed satisfied to live the barnyard life of the lowly hen. One day the farmer was visited by a shepherd who came down from the mountains where the eagles lived. Seeing the eagle, the shepherd said to the farmer, “What a shame to keep that bird hobbled here in your barnyard! Why don’t you let it go?” The farmer

agreed, so they cut off the restraint. But the eagle continued to wander around, scratching and pecking as before. The shepherd picked it up and set it on a high stone wall. For the first time in months, the eagle saw the grand expanse of blue sky and the glowing sun. Then it spread its wings and with a leap soared off into a tremendous spiral flight, up and up and up. At last it was acting like an eagle again.

It's the Holy Spirit of God that gives us the necessary glimpse into "the deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2:10). Oh soul, are you weary and troubled? No light in the darkness to see? There's light for a look at the Savior and life more abundant and free! Turn your eyes upon Jesus! Look full in His wonderful face! And (then) the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.

“THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE,” PART 1

THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION AND THE EXAMPLE OF PETER IN MATTHEW 16:13-26

INTRODUCTION

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The Scottish preacher John McNeill liked to tell about an eagle that had been captured when it was quite young. The farmer who snared the bird put a restraint on it so it couldn’t fly, and then he turned it loose to roam in the barnyard. It wasn’t long till the eagle began to act like the chickens, scratching and pecking at the ground. This bird that once soared high in the heavens seemed satisfied to live the barnyard life of the lowly hen. One day the farmer was visited by a shepherd who came down from the mountains where the eagles lived. Seeing the eagle, the shepherd said to the farmer, “What a shame to keep that bird hobbled here in your barnyard! Why don’t you let it go?” The farmer agreed, so they cut off the restraint. But the eagle continued to wander around, scratching and pecking as before. The shepherd picked it up and set it on a high stone wall. For the first time in months, the eagle saw the grand expanse of blue sky and the glowing sun. Then it spread its wings and with a leap soared off into a tremendous spiral flight, up and up and up. At last it was acting like an eagle again.

“THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE,” PART 2

THE POSITIVE SIDE OF DISCIPLESHIP MATTHEW 16:13-19

INTRODUCTION

The Doctrine of Sanctification is Necessary

In part one of this series we referred to the “necessity” of the doctrine of sanctification. Concerning the necessity of the doctrine, the apostle Paul offers the grand and glorious life-imperative revealed in this sobering proposition: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (**1 Thess. 4:3**). Within the context Paul details the process in terms of personal holiness, a quality of life that shares an affinity with an internal reality of holiness born in us by the presence of the Holy Spirit (**v. 8**).

It is by the agency of the Holy Spirit that we may engage this process, denying the flesh with its affinity toward the world and producing holy actions and attitudes (**Rom. 8:13; 1 Jn. 2:15-17**):

- We are the purchased possessions of God (**1 Cor. 6:19-20**).
- We have become vessels of mercy, brands plucked from the fires of destruction and set apart for His use (**Zech. 3:2; Rom. 9:23**).
- We are models of sanctifying grace (**Tit. 2:11-14**), an inner compulsion that draws us ever closer to the flame (**2 Cor. 3:18**) and purges away the defilements of the age and the passions of our own devices (**1 Jn. 3:1-3**).

The Doctrine of Sanctification is Diverse

Of Process and Perfection

Here we must further enlarge upon our subject by considering sanctification in terms of its “diversity.” By “diversity” is meant the various streams and tributaries that flow from the mighty current. Historically, the most divergent streams of teaching are represented on the one hand by the Reformed camp who regards sanctification as “never perfected in this life” (A. A. Hodge. 269, *A Commentary on the [Westminster] Confession of Faith*, 1869).

Yet, on the other hand, those representative of the teachings of John Wesley take issue, citing “Christian perfection” and defining it as an achievable state: “The loving [of] God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies no wrong temper, the thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love” (John Wesley. 1725-77, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 42).

For Wesley, whose teachings on the subject developed over fully one-half a century, this was not “sinless perfection,” admitting to the believer’s innate capacity for “involuntary transgressions” (p. 45) or what he terms “mistakes.”

Wesley observed, like the Reformers, that sanctification was indeed a process, but one whose end (an all-consuming love) is achievable in this life by virtue of a work of grace secondary to one’s experience of salvation, an instantaneous provision of God by faith.

Wesley maintained that “we are to expect it, not at death, but *every moment*” (p. 41) until such time as it is confirmed by deliverance from all sin. Charles Wesley wrote the two-volume *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749) that included the verse:

“Jesus, our life, in us appear,
Who daily die Thy death:
Reveal Thyself the Finisher;
They quickening Spirit breathe!
Unfold the hidden mystery,
The second gift impart;
Reveal Thy glorious Self in me,
In every waiting heart.”

The Wesleyan sentiments are indeed compelling and indirectly responsible (as much as the Reformers perhaps) for a median spirituality that called for the “suppression of the evil tendencies in man, as opposed to [their] eradication” (*Encyclopedia of America Religion, vol. 1, 205*). For men such as D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, A. J. Gordon, A. B. Simpson, A. T. Pierson, Andrew Murray, F. B. Meyer and Wilbur Chapman, sanctification offered a “brand of holiness which emphasized the giving of power [to engage sin victoriously] instead [of an absolute] cleansing from sin” from its expression in our daily lives (p. 203).

Briefly stated, the doctrine of sanctification is potentially as “divisive” as it is “necessary.” How can a biblical doctrine be divisive? In terms of the doctrine of sanctification, a great divide exists between the mere formulation of a scholastic creed and a vibrant depth of experience of the same.

Of Being and Living

Simply put, we must *live* the Christian life. Sanctification is about *being* a Christian and *living* christianly. The divine side and the human side are mirrored by deliberate acts of consecration (e.g., **Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 7:1**). Consider the notion that only God can render an absolute state of sanctification, a perfection that qualifies one to enter into a familial relationship with Him (**Heb. 10:1-31**). Living a sanctified life, however, involves the possession of sanctifying means and the intention for their daily employment (**Rom. 8:12-17; Jn. 17:17, 19; 1 Pet. 2:2**).

The Doctrine of Sanctification is Practical

The Example from Peter’s Restless Instability

When we consider the life of Peter, we see in a fleeting moment, a man of unshakable faith who is supreme in his devotion to Christ and unrelenting in his determination to do great things for God (**Matt. 26:31-35**). In the next moment we witness a man on the brink of disaster, burdened with doubts, plagued by impulsiveness, and covered with shame (**Lk. 24:54-62**).

It would be easy to reflect on Peter’s condition as recorded in the Gospels and explain it away as being the result of a pre-Pentecost state, one that abruptly changed after the Spirit descended in power upon the disciples (**Acts 1:8**). Yet, further study in the book of Acts reveals that Peter, though endowed with the Spirit, continued to suffer injury from repeated encounters with the self-life. Most notably, when Peter was encountered by the delegation from Caesarea, he had to be prepared by God through a vision in order to change his orientation toward Gentiles (**Acts 10:9-16**).

In the vision, Peter was shown a large sheet containing animals that were unclean according to the laws and customs of the Jews. God commanded Peter to, “Rise, kill and eat.” This occurred on three separate occasions. During each of the first two visions, Peter stubbornly refused saying, “Not so, Lord!” It was not until the third revelation; we presume from the text, that Peter relented. How strikingly similar is Peter’s, “Not so, Lord!” to his pre-Pentecost rebuke of Jesus (**Matt. 16:22**).

The Example from Peter’s Changing Affinity

Peter is an example of the residual self-life (“flesh”) of the Christian that imposes its affinity for the world whenever the Spirit is sequestered (opposite of filling and spilling forth, **Jn. 7:37-39; Eph. 5:18**) by “quenching” (**1Thess. 5:19**) or “grieving” (**Eph. 4:30**) His gracious longings heavenward. Every child of God possesses a quickened spiritual dimension that is a result of the new birth experience accomplished by the Holy Spirit (**Eph. 2:4-5; Jn. 3:3-8**).

The spiritual dimension is under the influence of the residing Spirit. The former sole governing dimension of the believer’s life is called “the natural-soulish man” (**1 Cor. 2:14**, yuciko! v. pneumatikw”). This describes the life of a person who does not have the Spirit of God and lives according to the dictates of his/her soul, one that is corrupted by sin and prone to acts of rebellion against God.

When a believer receives the Spirit of God at the moment of conversion, the former “natural man” is exchanged for the “spiritual-inner man” (**Eph. 3:16**), though under the gracious influences of the Holy Spirit, may through the remaining weakness of the flesh, yield to practices and attitudes that are consistent with the former “natural man.” Paul regards such living as “carnal” (compare **1 Cor. 2:14** with **3:1**).

The Agreement of Peter’s Example with the Balance of Scripture

The call to live as “dead to sin” and “alive to God” is expressed in **Romans 6:1-23**. The ability to live victoriously “in the Spirit” is characterized as the normal Christian life in **Romans 8:1-39**. Paul’s confession of the vain attempts of the “flesh” to live the normal Christian life is the substance of **Romans 7:15-25**.

What we encounter in the example of Peter (as that described by Paul) is not a process of sanctification that strengthens through repeated fleshly departures, but one that bears fruit, more fruit and much fruit as the branch abides in unbroken fellowship with the Vine and receives freely of the vast resources of God by His Spirit (**1 Cor. 2:12**). There is a side of discipleship we must stimulate and a side we must suppress.

- The former shares an affinity with all things heavenward, the latter is entangled in all things earthly.
- The former is in step with the Spirit, the latter is crippled by the flesh. The former is potent, the latter anemic.
- The former is normal, the latter prodigal.

I. The Side of Discipleship to Stimulate, vv. 13-20.

Here are all the blessings that attend to a life that obediently follows Christ. If we are permitted to observe the passage from a somewhat devotional point of view, several points emerge that are useful for stimulating a close walk with the Lord (see **1 Jn. 2:6**).

A. **Communion**, “the region of Caesarea Philippi,” v. 13

1. The city was located 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee and 1700 feet up the side of the Mount Herman. The majestic snow capped peak of Mount Herman rises some 7000 feet above the elevated city.
2. Of Caesarea Philippi and our Lord’s excursion there with His disciples, A. R. Faussett observes: “The remoteness and privacy of [the city made it suitable] for being the place [where] Jesus retired to prepare His disciples for His approaching death and shame and His subsequent resurrection” (*Bible Encyclopedia and Dictionary*).
3. The words “remoteness” and “privacy” with the intent of “preparation” make communion a deliberate choice. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus referred to a “room” where prayer could be conducted behind a “shut” door (**Matt. 6:6**). The issue at hand was not methods of prayer, but rather motivation in prayer. He or she who would have communion with God must regard prayer as the means for stimulating an intimate relationship with God and not a performance before men. If God knows your need before you ask (**Matt. 6:8**), is not plausible that His intention in prayer is that we engage in a spiritually formative experience?
4. Oswald Chambers: “To say that ‘prayer changes things’ is not as close to the truth as saying, ‘Prayer changes *me* and then I change things.’ God has established things so that prayer, on the basis of redemption, changes the way a person looks at things. Prayer is not a matter of changing things externally, but one of working miracles in a person’s inner nature” (*My Utmost for His Highest*, 8/28).

B. **Confrontation:**

1. Be in a position to hear the question: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” v. 13
 - a. It is through communion the Lord challenges, inspires, directs and corrects His disciples. The resident Spirit working in concert with the inspired Word reveals a depth of knowledge of Christ otherwise unattainable (**Jn. 14:21; 16:12-15**).
 - b. Growth comes within the context of intimacy and being in proximity of our Beloved (**Lk. 22:54; Jn. 21:19**).
 - c. The revealed person of Christ as stamped upon retina of our spiritual eye provides an enduring witness against every fleshly defection (**Phil. 1:21**).
2. Consider the options at hand: “some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and other Jeremiah or one of the prophets,” v. 14.

- a. Herod Antipas thought that Jesus was a resuscitated John the Baptist (**Matt. 14:2**)
 - b. Many of the Jews regarded Jesus' prophetic manner (miracles, boldness in preaching) as having the stature of a prophet (**Matt. 21:11**).
 - c. Moses had referred to a "Prophet" that God would raise up (**Deut. 18:11**).
 - d. Malachi wrote of Elijah whom God would send "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (**Mal. 4:5**).
 - e. While regarding Christ as a prophet is correct, it is also incomplete. Here lies our problem. **When we define the person of the Lord Jesus Christ according to human categories of thought we arrive at an incomplete understanding. It is Christ Himself that must redefine our categories by His own identity.**
3. Understand that the mandate of discipleship is universal: "But who do you-all say that I am?" v. 15
- a. Observe the shift of attention from the pedestrian and popular to the exclusive interests of His selected few. This was not a public opinion poll. This was not an attempt to gain a consensus opinion. This was not a pop quiz.
 - b. Revealed to Peter by heaven itself is nothing less than the ground and center of Christian life and sanctified living.
 - c. Those who shake their fists at God have no comprehension of their own identity let alone the identity of Christ.
 - d. The careless Christian has taken his or her eyes off Christ.
 - e. The child of God would dare to live the normal Christian life, does so on the basis of the identity of Christ, risen in glory and holding the heart captive.
 - f. We will advance no farther in discipleship than the clarity of our personal vision of Christ (holy, majestic, exalted, worthy, sovereign, reigning, helping, providing, forgiving, strengthening, rescuing, disciplining, teaching, comforting, protecting, **Rev. 5:8-14**).
4. The "you" here is plural, yet Peter takes the role of spokesman (see **v. 16** below).
- a. There are some interpreters who call attention to Peter's "standing up" at Pentecost in the role of a spokesman as indicative of a changed man and a transformed Peter (**Acts 2:14**).
 - b. However, it is clearly evident that the Pentecostal influence of the Spirit on Peter did not eradicate the temperament of the man.

C. Confession:

By “confession” is not meant to repent of one’s sins, but to freely assent to the true identity of Jesus as “the Christ of God.” This is a “confession” in the sense of an unashamed public profession of the divine character of Jesus of Nazareth (see **Rom. 1:16**). Such is the boldness of prepared hearts (**Acts 4:31**). Such is the essence of true worship (**Acts 16:25**).

1. The Exclusivity of the Lord Jesus, “You are”
 - a. We should reference the message of Peter following the phenomena of Pentecost and likewise his defense before the Sanhedrin (**Acts 2:36; 4:12**).
 - b. Isaiah observed the exclusivity of His person for satisfying the righteous demands of God on behalf of guilty sinners (**Is. 53:11**).
2. The Sufficiency of the Lord Jesus, “the Christ” (Messiah = Anointed One)
 - a. The One of whom Abraham spoke has come (**Gen. 22:8; Jn. 1:29**).
 - b. Jesus is the Chosen One of God, the One anointed as Israel’s Messiah and the Savior of the world (**Acts 10:38; 1 Jn. 2:2**).
3. The Deity of the Lord Jesus, “the Son of the living God,” v. 16
 - a. His teaching was self-authenticating and devoid of human citation (**Matt. 7:29**).
 - b. His works were self-authenticating signs of His divinity (e.g., the question posed: **Matt. 8:23-27** and answered: **14:22-33**).

D. Confirmation:

By “confirmation” here is not meant a sacrament, but the fruit-bearing proof of God’s working in our lives.

1. Receiving the Truth, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven,” v. 17
 - a. It is God who by His Spirit breaks through to us by unveiling the truth before the eyes of our inner man (**Ps. 119:18; 2 Cor. 2:6-16**). An alternate meaning of ἀποκαλύπτω, “to reveal,” is “to unveil” as in John pulling the curtains back in **Revelation 1:1**.
 - b. Like the disciples’ encounter with the risen Lord at a meal in Emmaus, where their “eyes were opened and they knew Him,” so our eyes must be opened to receive the truth (**Eph. 2:8; Jn. 1:12-13; Lk. 24:31, 45; Acts 16:14; 2 Tim. 2:7**).
2. Proclaiming the Truth, “You are Peter and on this rock,” v. 18
 - a. The name Peter in the Greek is *Petros*, or Rock. It has been argued that since the phrase “this rock” uses another Greek word for “rock” (*petra*) that a play on words is to be seen.

- b. Some have made much of this, founding the church upon Peter in the form of a long line of successive Popes. Jesus did not say “upon YOU, Peter, I will build My Church.”
 - c. The actual spoken expression would have used the Aramaic *kephas* for both words. If there is an emphasis here it is on “THIS rock,” with Jesus perhaps pointing to Himself as the Author and Finisher of our faith (**Heb. 12:2**) and the Foundation of the church (**1 Cor. 3:11**).
 - d. If the reference is to Peter, it is in the sense that the church will be founded on such as he, those who proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, opening the way of salvation to those who believe, or forbidding entry to those reject the truth, **Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor. 3:10**.
3. Believing the Truth, “I will build My church,” v. 18 (**Acts 1:1-2**)
 4. Preserving the Truth, “and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it,” v. 18 (**Is. 40:8; Ps. 12:6-7; Matt. 5:18; 24:35**).
 - a. The expression, “the gates of Hades,” is a Semitic reference to “the threshold of death.”
 - b. No opposition to the church, whether of Satanic or human origin, even to the point of inflicting death upon its members, can succeed in thwarting her mission. The book of Acts is indicative of this, e.g., **Acts 12:1-2, 24**.

E. Commission:

1. The Gospel Proclaimed, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven,” v. 19
 - a. Here is a promise to Peter to receive the means for governing entrance into the kingdom (“keys”).
 - b. Jesus elsewhere spoke of entering into the kingdom in terms of a pair of “gates,” a broad gate leading to destruction and the “constricted-narrow-difficult” gate leading to life that is found a few (**Matt. 7:13-14**).
 - c. Entering into the kingdom is on the basis of a new birth (**Jn. 3:3**)
 - d. The new birth is dependent upon the Gospel message as revealed in the Word of God (**1 Pet. 1:23**) and a corresponding response of faith (**Rom. 10:17; Eph. 2:8**).
 - e. It is the bearer of the message, the Gospel herald, which is emphasized by Paul as integral to bringing salvation to men (**Rom. 10:14-17**).
 - f. This is personally true of Peter and corporately true of all believers.
2. The Beliefs Challenged, “and whatever [beliefs],” v. 19 (see **2 Cor. 10:4-5**)
3. The Authority Affirmed, “you bind [forbid-close]...and whatever you loose [permit-open],” v. 19 (see **Matt. 18:18-19; 28:18**)

4. The Pattern Established, “and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven,”
v. 19 (see **Matt. 6:10**)
5. The Time Determined, “tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ”
 - a. **His time** for fully revealing, **Matt. 26:62-65**
 - b. **Our time** for fully revealing, **Acts 1:8**)

Conclusion

There is a side of discipleship we must stimulate and a side we must suppress.

- The former shares an affinity with all things heavenward, the latter is entangled in all things earthly.
- The former is in step with the Spirit, the latter is crippled by the flesh. The former is potent, the latter anemic.
- The former is normal, the latter prodigal.

When we speak of “stimulating” the life of discipleship, we might think of those who use artificial stimulants to enhance the performance of their bodies. God, however, does want us to do anything artificially, let alone attempt to live a life that’s pleasing to Him.

On February 11, 1962, *Parade Magazine* published the following brief account, itself a commentary on artificial stimulation.

At the village church in Kalonovka, Russia, attendance at Sunday school picked up after the church started handing out candy to the peasant children. One of the most faithful was a pugnacious lad who recited his Scriptures, pocketed his reward, and then fled into the fields to munch on it. The pastor took a liking to the boy and persuaded him to attend church school during the week. This was preferable to doing household chores from which his devout parents excused him. By offering other inducements, the pastor managed to teach the boy the four Gospels. In fact, the boy won a special prize for learning all four by heart and reciting them nonstop in church. While we might hail this a success story, 60 years later, the same boy was still reciting Scriptures, but in a context that would horrify most of us. The prize pupil, who memorized so much of the Bible, was Nikita Khrushchev, the former Communist czar. The same Nikita Khrushchev who had mouthed God’s Word as a child, later declared God to be nonexistent, because his cosmonauts had not seen Him. Khrushchev memorized the Scriptures for the rewards rather than for the meaning. Artificial stimulation will produce artificial results.