



Through the Grace of God

A Personal Survey of the Christian Faith

And an Introduction to Christian Contemplative Prayer

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Through the Grace of God

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Preface

My mother grew up in the Church of England and was therefore an Anglican. She was a Christian with no small passion for the mystical element of her Christian faith despite her lack of intellectual focus. My father was much more head-strong and much more metaphysically inclined. Although I grew up with a strong sense of their faith and ethics and principles, it was not until I was mid-way through graduate school studying theoretical physics that I realized my own passion for truth through the practice of meditation and the study of metaphysics, mysticism, philosophy, psychology, religion, spirituality, and theosophy.

I thus embarked upon an intellectual journey that took me through all manner of studies through some twenty-five years of seeking truth wherever it might be found. I traveled to India, to Hong Kong, to Japan, and many other places. I studied Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I also studied Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. At one point I considered myself a somewhat accomplished neo-Christian Buddhist-Taoist. The result of this intellectual and contemplative journey was a series of some 1,500 articles and commentaries privately published in a series of eight books, collectively entitled *The Upper Triad Material*.

And yet, in 1993 I found myself surprisingly empty. I came to realize that an intellectual understanding of anything was not really of much value to me. It was indeed not any real understanding. I realized I was almost-but-not-quite-hopelessly head-centered. I then began a second journey of soul-searching, of opening and unfolding the heart, becoming more heart-centered. Transcending to some extent the reliance upon ego and intellect.

And then, early in 2001, I encountered a young Christian who served as the catalyst for my spiritual renewal and a new journey back to my roots in the Christian faith. I started attending services regularly at an Alliance church in Virginia and subsequently at a United Methodist church.

So this new chapter in my life evoked a number of articles on the Christian faith and Christian contemplative prayer which are presented here in the order in which they were written. This new material is not meant to be authoritative or prescriptive in any sense. It is simply an indication of where I am at the moment, and how I am feeling. There are here no claims of inspiration or revelation. And similarly no claims of accomplishment. These are simply words, and mean whatever they mean to whomever may read them and find them of value. Or not.

In any event, I am quite grateful to my new Christian friends. But most of all I am grateful to our Lord who I have rediscovered deep within me, who has saved me once again from myself, who has provided me with a new and much more meaningful path.

Through the Grace of God, we are Forgiven

Through the Grace of God, we are Saved

Through the Grace of God, we are Healed

Through the Grace of God, our Hearts Unfold

Additional Caveats

Of course Peter Stewart Hamilton is a pseudonym. I have no need to be acknowledged as the author. And though I may share this manuscript with a few friends, it would seem to be mainly therapeutic.

I realize that these articles are simply a collection of words, with no real continuity except to my own senses. They were written over the course of perhaps twenty hours or so spread over four or five days, and that also included formatting them for publication on the Upper Triad website.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated first of all to our Lord Christ who lives deep within the heart of each of us.

And to my three wonderful children whose love and affection these past eight years have helped me through indeed a very dark night.

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I

The Christian Faith

This first series of articles is concerned with some basic elements of the Christian faith and serves as a prelude to the second series of articles on the methods and principles of Christian contemplative prayer.



God

Oneness and Greatness. There is only one God, but God lives on all levels and through all aspects of life in heaven and upon this earth. God's presence thrills through every atom and every molecule of matter. God's presence thrills through every aspect of consciousness. God's life energizes all lives human and otherwise. God is a unity. And God is universal. God is omnipotent and omniscient. All-powerful and all-sensing. Perfect. And largely beyond our comprehension. We are like the cells of His body, infused with His love and His purpose, yet unable to truly comprehend His greatness.

The Image of God. Many Christians perceive God in some anthropomorphic sense, attributing to God various human qualities and characteristics. Other Christians perceive God in some non-anthropomorphic sense, seeing God as being much more noble than human. It doesn't really matter. We resemble God in spirit, not necessarily in any physical or anthropomorphic sense. What does matter is that we develop a personal relationship with God, through Christ, and we can do that no matter the form in which we perceive Him. Is God male? Or female? Yes. Definitely. God is not limited to male or female expression. Traditionally one refers to God in the male sense of His being the Father and Creator, but to regard God as merely male is to limit our appreciation and understanding.

God is Noble. Some of us choose to perceive God in the most noble sense. God is love and compassion and gentleness and kindness and mercy and graciousness and all the other qualities-of-the-heart. God is not capable of anger or jealousy or any of the other less-than-noble human qualities. So how then do we account for such appearances of anger or jealousy in Biblical testimonies? Simply that God creates the world and sets into motion the

various laws of this world, including the laws of physics and laws that govern cause and effect relationships. Having created this world and its laws, God's plan is made manifest. When terrible things occur these are not the acts of an angry God, but rather the natural consequences of His natural laws. God is merciful. His Grace infuses all lives.

God's Plan. It would seem that God's plan is for us to learn and grow and serve Him. And all of the experiences of life contribute to this plan. All of our experiences are opportunities. If we ignore these opportunities then there are consequences. If we embrace these opportunities then there are also consequences, namely that we do indeed learn and grow. But even if we fail to embrace these opportunities, God remains gracious and merciful, and He then provides additional opportunities for us. For He does not give up on us. If we do not love Him, He does not love us any less. But if we do love Him, then we simply participate more actively in His love.

God and Fear. Should one fear God? Should one fear God's wrath? No. Not in the modern sense of this word. God does not punish us or hurt us in any way. He offers encouragement. What we should do is love God, respect God, admire God, revere God, and indeed worship God. We should trust in God. For He is the source of all goodness. The best, highest, deepest part of us is divine. And the worst, lowest, most superficial part of us is simply the absence of God. We tend to separate ourselves from God. We tend to seek material comforts and small pleasures. We tend to get lost in our little selves and our little interests. We tend to forget where we came from and Who sustains us and to Whom we shall return. And as we wake up, as we grow towards Him, we are renewed and encouraged in many more ways.

Immanence and Transcendence. God is both immanent and transcendent. God immanent is God inherent within us. Not merely potentially, but actually. We are part of Him. He lives within us. This is the basis of the Christian mystical tradition and the basis of personal relationship. For it is His Son, Christ, Who lives within us. God is also, simultaneously, transcendent, being far greater than we can imagine. God is both the creator and sustainer of the universe. His universe is incredibly vast. And all that we presume to understand about God is just a glimmer of the truth. We can

worship God in His transcendence, but we can only truly approach and embrace God through His immanence.

Creation and Evolution. In creating the universe God established the rules that govern his manifestation, such as evolution. There is no real inconsistency between creation and evolution. Both are true. But evolution derives from creation. And all of universal manifestation is an expression of God. God has purpose and intention. God has created the universe. God has placed into motion all of the laws of His manifestation, seen and unseen. We can see God underlying all the laws of nature, however poorly we understand them. We tend to see only bits and pieces of the whole truth. And the natural world, the physical universe, is but one dimension of His nature. His realm is much vaster and deeper than this superficial world of our limited senses.



The Trinity

God in Three Aspects. The Christian trinity consists of God in three aspects, namely God the Father, God the Son (Christ), and God the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit. There is only one God, but God may be perceived or approached through any one or more of His three aspects. Since God is a unity, when we approach one of the three aspects we are actually approaching all three at the same time. Each simply emphasizes an aspect of our relationship to God. God plays the role of the Father and creator, from Whom all life and love and light flows into the world. God plays the role of the Christ, the Son, Who serves as an intermediary and provides the means of salvation. And God plays the role of the Holy Spirit or divine manifestation.

God the Father. God in the highest sense is God transcendent, God the Father or Creator. This is the aspect of one God Who has purpose and it is His will that creates, animates, and sustains all the universe. It is His will that infuses all experience, all of life. It is also His will that we should each have free will. That we should ultimately recognize Him as our Father and Creator and acknowledge Him and worship Him and return to Him. In the metaphysical sense, God the Father is pure spirit.

God the Son. His Son, Christ, is the second aspect of trinity. He has sent forth His Son to live among us and within us. Christ is the intermediary, between the little human being and God the Father. Christ is the means of our fulfillment. It is Christ Who shows us the way to approach our God, through Him. In the metaphysical sense Christ is pure consciousness and the source of conscience. While God the Father creates and sustains us, it is God the Son Who saves us from ourselves. It is God the Son Who provides enlightenment and encouragement. It is God the Son who provides the ways and means of salvation.

God as Holy Spirit. The third aspect of trinity is the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit. This is perhaps the most misunderstood dimension of God. In the metaphysical sense the Holy Ghost is God-in-manifestation or God's Presence or power within matter. Many think of the Holy Spirit as that which heals, but in our experience it is Christ Who heals and it is the Holy Spirit which merely provides the reservoir of power. But that reservoir of power is inherently dangerous, for in our ignorance we can evoke power that we neither comprehend nor control. It would seem to be far better for us to focus on Christ and allow Him to guide whatever healing is needed.

Satan. We note that there is no Satan in this trinity. **God is goodness and the source of all that is good.** Satan represents the absence of God, the embodiment of evil, and the source of our less-than noble temptations. The struggle between good and evil continues. We have free will, but it is God's will that we recognize Him as our source and to Whom we must return. Thus God's plan for us involves both salvation and continued spiritual growth, that we might acknowledge Him and embrace His goodness. That we might approach Him and abide with Him. Satan is the absence of God and the very real power of

inertia that resists our embracing of God and Christ. Satan is a very real influence, the source of all lesser temptations. It is for us simply to embrace Christ within and break free from the entanglements of the world.

The Human Being as Trinity. In the Christian mystical tradition the human being is created in the likeness and image of God and is also a trinity. The first aspect of the human being is spirit in the highest sense, that part of the human being that resides with God always. The second aspect is the soul, which God creates and sends forth into this world for experience, eventually to return to Him. And the third aspect is the human personality, the little self, encompassing the body and emotions and mind.

The Soul. The soul is perhaps the most important practical aspect as it is our link to Christ. But we tend to get confused and entangled in our lesser selves. We tend to identify with the body and our emotions and the intellect and fail to realize that these things are all superficial. These things are all transient. It is the soul that endures, that lives forever. It is the soul that is saved. Yet the body and our emotions and mind should nonetheless be well-regarded, as these are our instruments for living in this world, through which to learn and grow and serve.



The Bible

The Holy Bible is God's Holy Word. The scriptural basis of the Christian faith. Some Christians consider the Bible primarily in its literal sense. Other Christians consider the Bible primarily in its symbolic sense. The inspiration of the Bible flows through every reading, so it doesn't really matter how literally or how symbolically we interpret things. We simply find the truth that we are

capable of embracing. If some of the words do not make sense to us in some way, then we simply embrace the truth on some other level.

Bible Study. This is really quite important. It is not sufficient merely to be a Christian. One must also live as a Christian, embracing Christian principles according to our understanding and ability. Bible study helps us in a number of ways. Through the Word of God there is learning. Through studying the Bible we can remain more focused on what is important, namely embracing Christian principles. Through studying the Bible, especially the New Testament, we are encouraged to live each day as Jesus lived, to embrace His sense of ethics and morals and behavior and principles and values. And this in turn helps us both to understand and to approach God.

Old and New Testaments. There is some difference of flavor between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament does not invalidate the Old Testament, but builds upon it and offers a broader context for understanding. For approaching God. The real message of Christianity is salvation and spiritual growth. And it is the life of Jesus that offers us encouragement. It was Jesus who became the Christ. It was Jesus Christ who provides the means of salvation. It is the life of Jesus that provides a role for Christian living and growing and for Christian service.

Infallibility. Is the Bible infallible? In some sense, yes. In some sense, no. The authors of the various books of the Bible were indeed inspired and wrote what they perceived to be true. But words mean different things to different people. And there is a cultural and psychological context for every author. This is not to say that we should interpret the Bible however we like, but rather that we should read the Bible prayerfully and meditatively, that we might also be inspired, to understand what we need to understand. That is the beauty of the Bible. That it means to each of us what it needs to mean. That any of us can find truth there. Even two thousand years or more after the fact.

Exclusiveness. Is the Bible the Word of God? Yes. Is the Bible inspired by God. Yes. Are all other so-called scriptures uninspired or less inspired? Does it really matter? Is not God larger than we are? Can He not speak to us through any means available? While the Bible should be our principal scripture,

we should not be thinking that we cannot learn from other sources. We may not need other sources, but other sources are not without merit. God's truth can be found almost everywhere. In nature. In people. Wherever He is, which is everywhere. That doesn't mean that anything we read has some truth or value. But that we should cultivate the ability to discern His truth. Through prayer and meditation, through our devotion to Him, He then enlightens our senses and provides discernment.

Conditioning. Perhaps unfortunately, in this human condition there are many temptations. Which fill our hearts and minds with lesser things. We are conditioned to think and behave in certain ways, to engage life in worldly terms. To embrace worldly values. At least the tendencies are there. The challenge for the Christian is to break through this worldly conditioning, to be free from the temptations of the world, and remain focused on what is important. Which means learning and understanding what is important, and then living accordingly, as best we can, with His Grace. And every time we read the Bible, sincerely, we are opening ourselves to Him.

An Open Heart is the real key to understanding. But if we don't read the Bible with an open heart, if instead we read with the mind, then there are passages in the Bible that can be misleading if taken literally. This is our limitation, not that of the Bible itself. If we are narrow-minded in our reading, then we cannot see the whole truth. If we are more broad-minded, more open-minded, more receptive, then we are more likely to see the truth that is there. But this does not mean that we see what we want to see. Not properly. Yes, we do tend to see what we want to see. But if our hearts are pure then we shall see only what is true and beautiful. For God is true and beautiful.



Salvation

What is Salvation? There are a number of definitions, all contributing something to what it means. The saving of a human being from the power and effects of sin. Liberation from clinging to the phenomenal world of appearances and final union with God or ultimate reality. The agent and means and source of spiritual experiences determining the soul's redemption. The preservation of the soul.

The Existence of Sin. Central to the issue of salvation is the existence and nature of sin. Sin is defined as an offense against God or a transgression of the law of God or simply the vitiated state of human nature in which one is estranged from God. Sin is bondage. The human soul is born into the world and suffers the illusion of separation from God. The human being is inherently ignorant and self-centered. The ego is an artificial entity derived from this illusion of separation. In ignorance we live according to our nature. As we awaken we realize that we are sinful and that God is real. We realize that we cannot save ourselves, that God has provided His Son for the purpose of redeeming us. But the first step in this process is the recognition of our sinful nature.

The Nature of Sin. **Sin is whatever separates us from God.** God is noble and good. Whatever we shall do that is not noble or not good is what separates us from Him. When we hurt other people or animals or the environment, we are sinning against God. When we lie, cheat, or steal, we are sinning against God. Whatever we believe that is not true separates us from God. Whenever we break any of the Ten Commandments, we are sinning against God. There are small sins and there are large sins, and as we grow in our faith our realization and understanding and awareness also grows. And we change. We become

less sinful. We don't become perfect, but we approach Him as we are gradually freed from the limitations of sinful activity. This doesn't mean that bad things can't happen to us. It simply means that we can face whatever challenges there may be with a purer heart and a wiser nature, because we are listening to and responding to His Presence.

Redemption. Many believe that we can earn salvation through purification or through good works. We cannot. Salvation is about grace. As we embrace God's grace we do indeed purify ourselves and engage in good works, but because that is part of our higher nature, not because it is a requirement for salvation. We are redeemed by virtue of professing our sinful nature, by accepting Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and by committing to a process of continuing spiritual growth. To believe we can save ourselves is a matter of illusion and ego. To believe that once saved we are free from any further obligations is also misleading. Being a Christian is about Christian living and spiritual growth and service and continues throughout our lifetime. If we are truly redeemed, then we submit our will to God's will. And we then become His servant. Everything we do then is an extension and expression of His will, however imperfectly we may be.

Atonement. Even as we are saved through His grace, we must still deal with our sins and the consequences of our sins. We are responsible for our actions and our nature. We are ignorant, and sin through ignorance. As we realize that we have sinned we must profess our sins to God and do whatever we can to atone for them. He forgives us, but we should learn from the experience. We should grow in our faith and not continue to repeat our mistakes. Thus atonement means reparation for our offenses or injuries, but it also means, literally, at-one-ment, which means that **through redemption and atonement we are brought closer to God.** Ultimately we return to Him, and achieve divine union.

Heaven and Hell. Also central to the Christian faith is a sense of heaven and hell and their distinction. Many Christians believe in the literal nature of heaven and hell. Others believe this in a more symbolic sense. But in either case there is a heaven and there is a hell. We can argue the details of what this means all we want to but it doesn't change what is true. It is whatever it is.

Heaven is living with God, either here and now or in the hereafter. And hell is living without God, similarly. True happiness, true redemption, is brought about only through the continuing process of salvation.

The Fundamental Purpose of the Christian Faith is to convey the process of salvation and encourage all of us to participate in this process. Every human being is imperfect. Each of us is ignorant and sinful. We cannot save ourselves or free ourselves from sin. It is God's life, and God's love, and God's light that shows the way. And it is the Son of God, Christ, who saves us. Christ is God's expression of love for all of us. Christ is the means of salvation. Christ lives within all of us. But it is only when we realize His presence within us, when we acknowledge His presence and His saving grace, that we are forgiven our sins. We cannot earn this salvation, though we are encouraged to live according to Christian principles.



Spiritual Growth

Deepening in One's Faith and Practice. It may suffice for some merely to be saved. But if one has experienced the grace of God there is an implied responsibility to continue to learn and grow and serve, according to one's (God-given) talents and opportunities. Spiritual growth is primarily about becoming more like Christ. To embrace God's goodness. To embrace Christian ethics, Christian morality, and Christian principles, however these are understood. Spiritual growth is really about approaching Christ through communion. Of tempering one's little will and embracing the greater will of God. Of emulating the character and quality of Christ as He and His life are understood.

Learning. Spiritual growth is not about knowledge but about learning. It is not about an intellectual understanding of anything, though knowledge and intellectual understanding may be helpful for some people. Spiritual growth is about learning the various lessons that are provided through God's grace, through experience. It is about learning from scripture and applying those lessons in our own lives and in our own relationships. It is about learning from experience and placing those lessons in a higher, Christian context.

Growing. Spiritual growth is about becoming more mature spiritually, about embracing a higher standard of ethical and moral behavior than would otherwise be the case. And in embracing Christian ethics and morals it is not about judging others or imposing our sense of things on others. True we have a responsibility for our children, to encourage them more directly than indirectly. And we should serve as an encouragement to others, without presuming any ethical or moral or spiritual superiority, and without imposing our values and principles upon others. **It is about being righteous without being self-righteous.**

Service. Spiritual growth is also about serving our Lord and His plan as we understand it and as we are called to serve according to our opportunities and talents. It is about helping others, according to their needs, not according to our own. We have no need for others to believe as we do, nor do we have any need for others to live as we live. We only have a need to live according to our own understanding of Christian principles, and thereby serve as an encouragement to others.

Authority. The only real authorities for Christian living are the Bible and our conscience. Both are properly inspired by God. We need only to read the Bible and pray for understanding and wisdom. We need only to listen to God and sense His wisdom-through-conscience. There are no other legitimate authorities. There may be people we admire and there are certainly many people we can learn from. But we cannot properly take other peoples' proclamations and professions as truth, unless they ring true according to our own God-given conscience. This is not to invite the ego or intellect to play the role of arbiter for our own convenience. Nor to ignore the knowledge and understanding and wisdom that others may have. But to rely first and foremost on scripture and

conscience. And not “do” something or “be” somehow just because someone says we should.

Rightness. Rightness is not ever properly about what we want or what is convenient for us. But our sense of rightness comes properly from our own personal relationship with Christ, through conscience. We can read the Bible and other works. We can listen to sermons. But as human beings we naturally interpret and understand things differently. What is true for one may not be necessarily true for another, because we are all different. We have come to where we are along different paths with different experiences and different understandings. The Bible is a wonderful guide. And our Church and fellowship provide further encouragement. Truth is what it is, truth. But we do not and cannot embrace truth completely and perfectly. Ultimately we can only do the best we can, with whatever understanding and ability we have.

Opportunities. All of life is filled with God-given opportunities, for learning, for growing, for serving. And this Christ within us offers continual encouragement, through conscience, through insight, through inspiration. Provided we learn how to listen to this inner voice of our Lord. But as we listen, as we learn, we deepen in our faith and in our practice. And we become more refined in our ways. We become less vulnerable to the coarser temptations. We become more aware of our limitations and weaknesses, and we are thereby enabled to grow. We find the inner strength to face the various challenges of life in this world. We find an inner calm and a gentle inspirational guidance. We naturally and gradually embrace our spiritual calling.



Grace

Three Kinds of Grace. There is first and foremost God's saving grace, which is the central ingredient to salvation. Secondly, there is the central ingredient to spiritual growth which is God's grace. And thirdly there is all manner of sustenance. It is God's grace which provides salvation, and it is God's continuing grace which provides all manner of blessings in our lives.

Blessings. There are so many blessings in life, all of which are conveyed through God's grace. There is life itself, and the air and water and food which sustains our life in this world. There are all manner of worldly gifts with which we are blessed and for which we are responsible for wise application. We do not properly "own" anything, but we do properly serve as stewards for His wealth. The notion of tithing is just a small part of being responsible stewards. It is the spirit of caring and sharing that matters, not how much or in what ways we share our blessings. But we should take care not to appropriate for ourselves what is truly His, and we should take care not to take ourselves and our prosperity and our achievements too seriously. For all of what we are and all of what we achieve in this world are more truly His rather than ours. Ego and pride and selfishness are things which separate us from God and undermine all manner of opportunities for learning and growing and serving.

Action and Consequence. One of the more poignant of God's laws has to do with action and consequence. For every thought, for every feeling, for every action, there are consequences. We do not earn salvation. And we may not understand cause and effect relationships. But we do evoke consequences in the form of learning opportunities. All of life in this world is about our relationship to God, about deepening in that relationship. And everything that He has set into motion simply provides for our learning and growing and serving.

Rationalization. There is perhaps a human tendency to rationalize the workings of our Lord. To think in terms of cause and effect relationships. To judge and analyze and rationalize and draw conclusions. But in the final analysis, these processes do not truly serve His cause. They take us away from Him and allow the ego and pride and self-centeredness to rise within us. If we say someone deserves his or her consequences, then we have judged and simply misunderstand the whole panorama of experience and expression. We cannot know and understand all of God's workings or see how all the pieces fit together. And if we do not know and understand that we cannot know and understand this then we lead ourselves astray.

Law and Grace. Some would say that everything happens according to natural law. Some call it God's law of action and consequence. Others call it karma. But while this may be true, it is nonetheless wrong to think with any emphasis in these terms, because natural law is at best secondary. What is primary is God's grace. Only through grace can all things be explained. Only through grace can we be free from the need for explanation. Only through accepting the role of grace can we transcend our tendencies toward rationalization and judgment and self-righteousness and any sense of superiority. Laws may be true, to the extent that we understand them. But **God's grace is a greater truth.**

Graciousness. All these many gifts realized and otherwise are part of God's grace. He is an eminently gracious God. He provides everything we need, provided we listen and heed His calling. And as we embrace His nature we become more gracious, and we live more as He, Jesus Christ, lived on earth. Through the means of graciousness and humility we learn not to measure our gifts nor to compare ours with theirs. But to realize that all gifts are from God, and His ways are simply His ways.

Love. God loves all of us, whether we are Christian or otherwise, whether we acknowledge Him or not, whether we embrace His Son or not, whether we choose to heed His calling or not. He is a gracious and merciful God. Christians are not inherently superior to others. In God's eyes, we are all equal. And God's sustaining grace is provided for all, regardless of faith or

circumstances. But those who embrace His love, who acknowledge His presence in our lives, those are led toward and through the process of salvation and redemption. And those who do not simply persist in the wilderness, loved nonetheless, until their time has come. *As we embrace God's love for us, we express that love through compassion for all.* We do not judge people in any way. We simply have compassion for all.



Fellowship

The Church is first and foremost a place of worship. But the fellowship of other Christians is also really quite important. We do not need a priest or pastor in order to be saved. We need only to profess ourselves to our Lord with earnest acknowledgement and genuine commitment. We do not need a church or the fellowship of other Christians in order to become or to be a Christian. But the church does provide something quite valuable in the form of the continual encouragement that most people need in order to live more effectively according to Christian principles. The isolated Christian may study the Bible and learn and grow to some extent. One who can pray and meditate can deepen in his or her faith. But in the community and fellowship of the church we find much more that enables us to overcome the inertia of our own little lives. What we learn tends to be reinforced in meaningful ways through fellowship with other Christians.

Community of Believers. In the community of other Christians we develop more healthy relationships with people. We find much in the way of encouragement and inspiration. Indeed, most of us need continual reminders of what is truly important in our lives. Those who believe as we do and practice the principles of Christian living as we do are encouraging to us. It is not that our faith requires others to believe or practice as we do or that something is true

because so many others believe it is so, but that being around people of similar spiritual interests and perspective is encouraging. The Church properly provides a forum for both worship and meaningful fellowship. We learn from each other and we help one another in our spiritual growth and service.

Community. But the church is necessarily part of a larger community, which usually includes other Christian denominations and other faiths as well as those of little or no faith. We have a responsibility to share our faith, without imposing, without judging or demeaning the faith or beliefs of others. We have a responsibility to the community or larger cultural context in which we find ourselves, simply to live as our Lord would have us live, as He would live. The greater form of leadership and encouragement is simply to live according to our principles, without actually trying to preach to others. To share or witness according to our opportunities, but without separating ourselves from others in the process. God lives through all of us. Our friends and neighbors of other faiths are no less God's children by virtue of their faith being different from ours. And the larger community also offers a field of opportunity for charity and service well beyond the immediate boundaries of our particular fellowship.

Service is really very much a part and consequence of spiritual growth. As we grow and deepen in our faith, as we become more attuned to the moral and ethical and service principles of our faith, we naturally engage in various service activities, according to perceived needs and opportunities and according to our various talents and resources. Learning to go beyond our own perceived needs, to help others without regard for compensation or reward or even to see the results of our work. This is **living from the heart, allowing God to live through us.**

Human Relationships. Much of what we learn in this world comes about through our relationships one with another. Right human relations, living honorably and respectfully with others, does wonders for individual growth and community health. We may not believe as others believe, but we should be nonetheless appreciative that we all have choices and we all have the right to believe as we will. It is part of how we learn.

Goodwill. Some Christians are antagonistic to peoples of other denominations or other faiths. This is not what being a Christian is all about. Embracing goodwill toward all, regardless of differences in beliefs, is living from the heart. Those who undermine goodwill are simply separating themselves more so from God. There is never any need to fear what others believe, or what values others may embrace. One should simply live according to one's own proper values, and thereby promote peace and harmony and goodwill among all peoples. This in turn creates a healthy environment in which to learn from one another.

Diversity. The Christian faith is among the most diverse religions, having countless denominations and perspectives, all of which contribute to what is Christianity in practice. What this really means is that Christianity is appealing to diverse peoples. Some are rather conservative and prescriptive, some even rigidly so. Most are relatively moderate and comfortable. While some are rather liberal and non-prescriptive. Each contributes to the whole, and each has both strengths and limitations. It seems pointless to argue which is right. *What really matters is that we find and feel Christ in our hearts.*



The Sacraments

What is a Sacrament? A sacrament is a formal religious act that is sacred as a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality. There are various sacraments embraced by different denominations, or embraced in different ways, but generally these include the sacraments of profession, baptism, communion, ordination, marriage, and confession. In some denominations there are also sacraments concerned with confirmation, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, and various holy orders.

Profession of Faith. This is not generally considered a sacrament, but it is the most important act of faith. It is our response to God's offer of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is becoming a Christian. It is a matter of professing our sins, professing our acceptance of Christ as our Saviour, and committing ourselves to His path. This is the sacrament of salvation. A genuine profession of faith leads to continuing spiritual growth.

Baptism. This is arguably the next most important sacrament, because it is a public acknowledgement and confirmation of our salvation. In some churches this involves complete immersion in water, in others simply an anointing by water. But what really matters is that we publicly acknowledge our commitment and join the community of believers.

Communion. This is also known as the Eucharist. Communion is a reenactment of the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples before his death on the cross. It is a ceremony of participation in the life of Christ, through the sharing of food and drink. The food (typically bread) symbolizes the body of Christ. The drink (typically grape juice) symbolizes the blood of Christ. It is a means through which we approach and commune with Christ. In some churches communion is taken in small groups. In other churches the entire congregation takes communion in place at the same time. Frequency of communion varies from denomination to denomination and in some cases even from church to church. What matters is not the ceremony itself, but that we actively and consciously participate in the meaning of communion.

Ordination. The sacrament of ordination is the sacrament in which God empowers trained persons for special ministry as church officials, such as deacons, priests, or bishops. It is quite important in the sense that one who is ordained is invested with certain powers, provided he or she remains true to his or her faith and training. In some Christian communities every church member is formally ordained. In some communities there is no real appreciation for ordination.

Marriage. The sacrament of holy matrimony is Christian marriage, in which a woman and a man enter into a life-long union and take their vows before God in

a worship service. The sanctity of marriage is really quite important and should not be taken lightly. **Only God can bless a marriage and make it true.** A marriage partnership in which God plays a central role then provides greater opportunities for learning and growing and serving.

Confession. This is sometimes called reconciliation of a penitent and is simply a private or semi-private confession of sins, either in one's own heart or with a priest. What matters is that we continually acknowledge our nature through confession and dedication to spiritual growth. Merely attending services does not suffice. Merely verbalizing some confessional prayer does not suffice. What matters is genuinely learning and growing through our experience, deepening in our faith. And confession is one means through which this deepening is encouraged.



Death

What is Death? Death usually refers to the end of life on earth, the permanent cessation of all vital functions. This death of the body is feared by many people, either because they are attached to living or because they fear the possibilities implied in death, such as there being no life after death, such as being judged by God, such as spending all of the rest of eternity in hell. Fear of what is not really known.

Confusion. Thus there is much confusion in the minds of many people regarding death. Much of the basis of conventional Christianity is the distinction made between going to heaven upon the death of the body and going to hell, forever. This dichotomy may make sense to many people, and indeed there is Biblical basis for this. But there are other Biblical explanations that

also make sense to some, that are consistent with a more symbolic reading of scripture. The fact is that we don't know intellectually what is actually true about death other than the fact that we all die at some point in our lives on earth. Until we have been there and can see for ourselves. But there is, in opening the heart, an unquenchable realization that there is indeed life after death, that indeed there is a better place than earth.

The Senses. Many people believe only what they can see and feel with the ordinary senses. That what they see and feel is all there is. That the world is mechanistic and when the body dies then so do we. But through prayer and meditation we realize that we are not the body, we simply inhabit the body for a while. That we are indeed each of us a soul, created by God, which has come from another place, and will journey onward upon the death of the body. The Bible tells us this. Our inner senses tell us this.

Life is precious and the taking of life a sin. This does not mean that we should sustain ourselves artificially, that we should cling to life at all costs regardless of the quality of life. What it means is that we should honor life and make the best of our God-given opportunities. To promote health and welfare. To promote learning and growing. To promote the meaningfulness of life. And to recognize and acknowledge God's role in life.

Dying Gracefully. Death is almost always a sad occasion, for those who remain in this world. But sometimes it is a release from the pain and suffering of this world. And it is, in principle, a celebration of life-after-death. It is wrong to take another's life. It is wrong to take one's own life. Life and death are God's purview, not ours. But **it is for us to live life graciously, and to die gracefully when our time comes.**

Rebirth. There is also death in the sense of one being reborn, in the sense of one awakening to God and Christ within us, and beginning a new life. This is salvation. It is a renewal of life and in the new life we are energized and motivated and inspired in new ways. Spiritual rebirth is a regeneration of our spirit, consciously inviting and accepting Christ to live through us. Which is the true meaning of being a Christian.

Reincarnation. Many Christians believe simply in one life on earth followed by life eternal in heaven or in hell. Other Christians believe that we are reborn to this earth many times, that we learn and grow progressively, through evolution, but never through transmigration. That we return to heaven in between lives on earth, and eventually return to heaven and remain there. There is, arguably, a Biblical basis for both of these perspectives. The fact is that we can only prove something is true to ourselves, whether or not something is actually true. And we can never prove something to someone else, except superficially and then only if a person so chooses to accept something as true. But it really doesn't matter which is true, for what is true is true, whether we realize the truth or not. What matters is our Christian faith and how we live our lives on earth.

Through the Grace of God, we are Forgiven

Through the Grace of God, we are Saved

Through the Grace of God, we are Healed

Through the Grace of God, our Hearts Unfold

II

Methods and Principles

This second series of articles is concerned with the basic methods and principles of spiritual growth and Christian contemplative prayer.



Commitment

Why is Commitment so Important? Because it is commitment that brings results. Without commitment and follow-through there is a natural tendency for inertia to set in and for us to be not so involved in or responsive to the process of spiritual growth. When we commit to Christ we are from that moment changed in our relationship. We open ourselves just a little bit and He then begins to work more actively through us. With commitment and dedication we are able to sustain our receptivity and responsiveness. Even so there may be times when we drift away from our focus and need reminding and renewal and restoration. But with genuine commitment we are always receptive on some level.

Commitment and Growth. All of life for all of us is about learning and growing. For some apparently more so than for others. But to learn and grow actively and consciously, to deepen spiritually, requires commitment and dedication. When one makes this commitment then the experiences of life are heightened and strengthened by our new relationship. Our growth is hastened. This doesn't mean that life will be void of all challenges and difficulties. To the contrary, challenges and difficulties suggest that we are indeed receptive to learning through these experiences. Moreover, painful experience may suggest that we are or have been unresponsive or resistant to learning, that we may need to wake up in some sense or another.

Calling. As Christians it is our calling to embrace the process of spiritual growth, but the specifics vary a great deal from one to another. Some are called to learn and grow and serve in particular ways. Some are called to learn and grow and serve according to whatever opportunities and talents are there. But we must be able to hear this call and respond to it sensibly. If we are absorbed in the material world or entangled in our senses or self-absorbed then we are

simply not very receptive. We do not recognize the call nor can we heed the call. But with commitment and dedication we are more receptive. And responsive.

Crisis and Commitment. But before we actually do commit, there is generally a crisis of commitment of some sort or another. Perhaps we face challenges and difficulties that are almost overwhelming and this crisis leads us to the Lord within. Perhaps in embracing Him there are parts of our lesser self that resist and tend to undermine our making a commitment. As human beings we have inertia and we tend to have entanglements and we tend to have some measure of self-absorption. As these are overcome, gradually or otherwise, we become more free to commit and embrace the process.

Distraction and Temptation. Yet throughout the crisis of commitment, and through the following tenure there are distractions and temptations. We are human after all. But with commitment and dedication, and with receptiveness and responsiveness, we endure these distractions and temptations without being overwhelmed by them, and we emerge stronger and more committed.

The Role of Church and Bible Study. As Christians we are not required to “do” anything as part of our spiritual life. But we are strongly encouraged to “do” all the things that facilitate our spiritual growth, such as participating in church services, Bible study, and other fellowship and service activities. All these things help keep us focused on what is important. On our principles and living more effectively in accordance with our principles. The church properly provides much in the way of encouragement. Bible study likewise. The constructive and meaningful fellowship of friends and family similarly.

Commitment and Results. It is commitment that brings results. But the objective is not really to achieve any particular results. The objective is to be engaged in the process of spiritual growth and to thereby allow Him to guide us. We are not perfect and cannot achieve perfection here on earth. But we can become more receptive and responsive and we can become more effective in our spiritual lives.



Refinement

Ordinary and Extraordinary Paths. Most Christians simply grow spiritually by virtue of their involvement in church activities and by virtue of their commitment to their faith. Most Christians are not called to the priesthood nor are they called to engage the more mystical path toward conscious communion with Christ. There is no proper distinction between those who are called in one way and those who are called in another, but the rules for each are different, because the ways and means are different. We remain equal, one to another, and no one is special, except in the sense that we are all special, but some people are called to take a different path.

Refinement is a more deliberate means of facilitating spiritual growth and being more receptive to spiritual guidance. Refinement is important to some extent to all who would seek spiritual growth, but refinement is particularly important for anyone who is called to the path toward conscious communion. Refinement is simply the endeavor to purify oneself of whatever hindrances and barriers there may be to spiritual growth. All efforts toward refinement are beneficial to one's health, but it is up to each to realize what is truly appropriate in this regard. To take refinement in some extreme sense is actually counter-productive. Refinement is not properly an end in itself. It is merely a means to an end.

Coarseness. Refinement is the opposite of coarseness. One of the first things to be "refined" is the way we speak and think and feel. Coarse, profane, and vulgar language constitutes a barrier between us and the God within. God is pure. God is refined. As we become more refined we are more able to truly hear His voice and be attuned to His will. Cleanliness is also quite valuable, both in terms of physical health and in terms of psychological health.

Physical Health and Fitness. We are each blessed with a vehicle for living and expressing ourselves in this world. To be more effective in this regard it behooves us to look after the body and our capacity for feeling genuinely and our capacity for thinking clearly. Smoking is widely regarded as harmful to our health. It places quite a burden on our system. Similarly, drinking alcohol or taking recreational drugs is inherently harmful, even if not widely regarded as such, and tends to strengthen the little self at the expense of being receptive to our higher calling. Being substantially overweight or being substantially underweight also places undue burden on the physical health. Being physically fit, at least moderately so, enables us to function more effectively in this world.

The Ten Commandments. There is a reason why these rules are given to us. Because adhering to these commandments brings us closer in consciousness, closer in our hearts, to God. In principle, the ten commandments are relatively simple and self-evident, though we are of course each tempted in different ways. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Honor thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's."

Other Formulations. There are other ethical and moral formulations that do not replace the ten commandments in any sense, but simply expand upon these ethical and moral themes and lead to refinement. To be honest in all regards. To not deliberately or carelessly harm anyone, by virtue of our thoughts, our feelings, our words, or our actions. To have compassion for all. To be humble. To live as Jesus lived. To treat everyone as we would have them to treat us, not to expect others to treat us this way, but because it is right for us to do this. Righteousness is its own reward. And self-righteousness a path away from God.

More Subtle Forms. There are more subtle forms of refinement, that apply more to psychological and spiritual health and perhaps more so to those who are called toward conscious communion. Things like achieving emotional equilibrium, enabling a depth and breadth of feelings without being unstable. Things like transcending the intellect and transcending reliance on rationalization, to enable the more direct perception of truth, through cultivation of spiritual intuition. Things like transcending the ego, embracing humility and the spiritual strength and inner receptivity that humility evokes in us.



Prayer and Meditation

Refinement and Prayer. It turns out that one of the ways and means of refinement is genuine prayer. **Prayer brings us closer to God and helps us to be more receptive to God.** Prayer brings about changes in our lives, not so much superficial and material changes, but more substantive changes in how we feel and how we are able to live more constructively, more meaningfully.

Kinds of Prayer. There are of course many kinds of prayer, but in general there are four forms, namely prayers of adoration, confession, supplication, and thanksgiving. There are verbal prayers where we are simply speaking to God, giving praise, professing our sins, asking forgiveness, seeking resolution of issues. Prayer can be very personal. Prayer can also be less personal. Prayer can be repetitive, in simply repeating of prayerful phrases, or prayer can be very unique to every instance of prayer. One should however guard against repetitive prayer as it can easily become meaningless. **One needs to genuinely feel what one is praying.** The words themselves are never sufficient. Among the most poignant of prayers are affective prayers and receptive prayers. But these properly require some experience and training. There is also a matter of

spiritual praying of scripture, known as Lectio Divina. There are prayers of thanksgiving. There are prayers of petition or supplication. There are selfish prayers and there are unselfish prayers. But in each case genuine prayer is a reaching out to God, a deliberate sending forth of one's thoughts and feelings to God. And in each case there is a divine response.

Does God Answer Prayer? Yes. Does God **always** answer prayer? No. Does God **respond** to prayer? Yes. Does God **always** respond to prayer? Yes. We need to understand that prayer works. That prayer is our way of communicating with God. That our prayerful expression evokes a response. Every time. The response may not be what we want, or may not be all of what we want. But it will always be what we need, to the extent that we are receptive. That is the key. To be receptive. **To be open to God, to be receptive to His wisdom, and His plan.**

Meditation. Meditation might be considered as receptive prayer. Prayer is properly distinguished somewhat from meditation, though one should indeed lead to the other. Prayer is speaking to God. And **meditation is a place and process of listening to God.** Prayer is relatively easy. Meditation is somewhat more difficult. Meditation is properly actively not thinking. Meditation is never properly a passive experience. To be properly receptive, one must be actively receptive.

Eastern and Western Approaches. Meditation is sometimes misunderstood as belonging to the various Eastern religions. But in fact meditation is common to all religions, just as prayer is common to all religions. But the various forms of prayer and meditation may vary somewhat between religions. Christian prayer has a definitely Christian form and focus. Christian meditation has a definitely Christian form and focus. There are common elements to Eastern and Western forms, just as there are common elements to both prayer and meditation. But what really matters is that we are expressing ourselves before God, and becoming more receptive to His insights and to His will.

Common and Not-so-Common Approaches. Most people are familiar with the common forms of prayer. And many people are familiar with popular

forms of more-or-less superficial meditation. But the more potent forms are only really familiar to those who truly seek communion with God. The Christian faith has a very long history of contemplative prayer and various forms of meditation. Some of the names of the various Christian mystics are somewhat familiar, such as St. John of the Cross. Other names less so, such as Origen. But one thing brings them all together and that is through trial and error, through practice and experience, **through the grace of God, the seeker is brought to a profound place of silence deep within.**

The Dark Night of the Soul. The way from where we are to this place deep within us, this place of communion with Christ, is a rather difficult passage. It requires not inconsiderable commitment and dedication. It requires not inconsiderable suffering, though it may not be apparent to many why it should be so. This passage through the wilderness, through the dark night of the soul, is to prepare us for communion. We cannot achieve true communion without paying the price of admission, and that is leaving behind all the psychological baggage that we have acquired over the years. It is a process of purification, of tests and trials, of forbearance. It is a process of persistence. And gradually one becomes more gentle in every regard. One learns how to speak and think and feel with gentleness. One learns how not to speak or think in any deliberate sense. One learns how to be truly humble. One learns how to be. And no words can properly explain this. Those who have been there can only provide hints here and there as to what it requires and what it is like. But all who have been there say that the process evokes the most profound and unimaginable despair, and that the process results in the most profound and unimaginable joy.



Centering Prayer

What is Centering Prayer? It is a method of preparing oneself for contemplative prayer, which is in turn a method of approaching and engaging in true communion with God. Centering prayer is in effect a practice which helps us through the transition from ordinary or active prayer to more receptive contemplative prayer. It is preparatory in the sense that it conditions us to receive the gift of God's presence. It is a meditative discipline in the sense that it conditions our bodies and hearts and minds, by quieting our faculties in order to participate more fully in contemplative prayer. But it is not an end in itself.

The Method of Centering Prayer. The method of centering prayer is very similar to "transcendental meditation" except that it has a distinctly Christian focus and if engaged in properly will lead well beyond that simple meditation practice. Centering prayer involves the use of a sacred word which expresses our intention to engage God's presence and to yield to divine action. Any word that helps us to focus on God's presence will suffice, e.g., God, Lord, Master, Christ, Father, humility, compassion, etc. In lieu of a sacred word one might utilize a simple visualization or gaze. The basic idea is to focus on God's presence, actively engaging His presence, returning our focus to the sacred word whenever we become aware of thoughts, thereby training the mind not to think during this process. It is not properly a passive experience, as the mind is brought to a point of tension or focus. It is inherently a receptive experience.

Place, Timing, and Duration. The timing of centering prayer is not as important as consistency. A daily rhythm is necessary and a twice-daily rhythm is preferred. Thrice-daily is even better. At least twenty minutes should be devoted to each session, though longer periods, up to an hour, can be helpful. A regular time and place where distractions are minimized or precluded

are also quite helpful. It is not wise to engage any prayer or meditation practice soon after eating a meal or engaging in stimulating activity. Some find a quiet period or prelude of an hour to be very helpful in this regard. If only one daily session is engaged, then early morning is preferred as it tends to set the tone for the entire day. A twice-daily rhythm generally adds an evening session, though a mid-day session works better for some. The intent is to establish and maintain an effective rhythm, and to allow the "quality" of centering prayer to have an effect on our daily lives.

Calming. The first real requirement in centering prayer or effective meditation is for the body to be comfortable and sitting still and with the eyes closed one should calm the emotions and the mind. The chosen sacred word should be utilized throughout the meditation practice or prayer period, though one can change to another sacred word for a subsequent session if one proves more effective than another. The role of the sacred word is to focus the mind, without engaging in thinking, thereby calming both the emotions and the mind. Thus one needs not to be entangled in the word itself or any thoughts that are evoked. Naturally the mind will tend to engage in associative "thinking" so one needs to continually and gently bring the mind back into proper non-thinking focus whenever there is a distraction or wandering off. Sometimes gazing upon one's image or sense of God is quite effective. If a sacred word is utilized, it should be engaged rather gently, but consistently. The whole process is a letting go of what is going on in our worldly lives, for a while, to enable conscious-but-non-thinking realization of God's presence. It is not about relaxing, but one needs to be relaxed in order for this to work.

Focus. The focus of centering prayer should be upon God's presence, through the means of the sacred word, but without "thinking" about either one. The objective is to become more receptive to God's presence and our Lord's guidance, which means clearing the mind and bringing the mind to a point of tension or focus in which one is not distracted on any level. This may require consistent effort over many weeks or months, in some cases years, in order to bring about the intended results. The more refined one's nature the easier is this process. Not-thinking in this context means not consciously thinking nor engaging the outer senses in any way. Whenever there is a distraction, internally or externally one must simply and very gently return to the focus or

center. If we are successful in centering prayer then the sacred word itself will disappear and we will simply bathe in God's presence.

The Center. The method is called centering prayer because it helps us to focus on the center of our being, which is our relationship to God. **God and Christ are at the center of our being** and should be our central focus. What is not at the center of our being is our threefold personality of mind, emotions, and body. The personality is the very periphery of our true being. The problem is that that is where most people live, on the exterior surface, relatively superficially. Centering prayer helps us to find the center of our being and helps us to extend that "quality" to the surface layers of ordinary life.

Centering Prayer is a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship. This is what distinguishes centering prayer from ordinary meditation. **Centering prayer is an exercise of the heart**, embracing love, compassion, mercy, gentleness, kindness, and other qualities-of-the-heart, which are all God's qualities. Centering prayer is a transition, a movement beyond conversation with God or Christ, to actual communion. Centering prayer is also a conditioning practice that acclimates us to the language of God, which is interior silence.



Contemplative Prayer

Christian Contemplative Prayer is a method of opening the mind and the heart to God, leading to communion, or divine union, with Christ. It is not contemplative per se, because the mind is necessarily quiescent, but the method involves the mind and contemplative practice and leads to quiescence. So one might say that the method is contemplative, but that the actual state of

communion is not contemplative. Similarly, contemplative prayer is not prayer as it is generally understood, but a practice of meditation. Thus the method involves prayer and leads to meditation, which in turn leads to communion.

Christian Focus. Christian contemplative prayer is definitely Christian. Because it involves acknowledging Christ within us and it involves becoming more receptive to the presence of Christ. It is a way of approaching God through Christ. It is a way of calming the little self and finding the greater self who is Christ. It is in effect the yoga of the Christ. Of achieving divine union through the intermediary of Christ. It is not so much about communicating with our Lord, but rather it is about becoming receptive to our Lord. This is communion in the truest sense, the mystical experience. **Becoming one with God. Allowing His grace to enfold us.** Allowing His life to flow through us. And living truly through the heart.

Other Forms. Of course there are other, non-Christian forms of contemplative prayer. Every God-centered religion has its mystical tradition and meditation practice. But in the final analysis, **as one approaches God** through any proper means, **one finds Christ, deep within oneself.** Regardless of one's religious tradition, regardless of one's approach, the greatest human experience would seem to be acknowledging Christ within us, embracing His grace, and allowing His life to flow through us.

Distinction between Centering Prayer and Christian Contemplative Prayer. Christian contemplative prayer is distinguished from centering prayer in the sense that centering prayer is preliminary, a method of training the mind and preparing oneself for contemplative prayer. Centering prayer may lead to the practice of Lectio Divina or the spiritual praying of scripture, as further training and preparation, or it may lead more directly to contemplative prayer. Centering prayer is a method and an approach. Contemplative prayer is simply being. **Contemplative prayer is true communion.** Once one has embraced or reached contemplative prayer, then centering prayer or some comparable method may be used as a brief prelude. The adept can move from ordinary "life" to centering prayer to contemplative prayer almost effortlessly. But to get to that place require a great deal of preparation, which most Christians are simply not called upon to engage.

True Communion. It is almost impossible to describe contemplative prayer or true communion. Words are simply inadequate. One must experience this personally in order to appreciate and apprehend what it is and even then one cannot properly describe or communicate the experience. It is an almost overwhelming feeling of the presence of God through Christ. It is a oneness with Christ such that the little self or ego no longer exists, at least for the duration of the communion experience. It is the most humbling experience imaginable, and the most wonderful. **The absence of the little self is an absolutely delightful place.** The presence of God thrills through every aspect of our being, consciously. And we are simply the gentle-and-quiet witness.

The Fruits of Communion. The consequences of contemplative prayer are similar to those of centering prayer only relatively more pronounced. While centering prayer tends to qualify or condition the daily life, contemplative prayer tends to much more completely engage one in daily life. With centering prayer one goes to a nice place once or twice or three times a day. With contemplative prayer one remains in that nice place, practically all of the time, even while engaging the world. We become contemplative, not in the sense of how we think, but in the sense of how we do not think, but simply feel God's presence at all times and in the sense that that presence thrills through us and into every aspect of our life. It is as if God and Christ are speaking to us always. And we are always receptive.

Practical Import. The practical consequences of contemplative prayer include God's healing presence, a continuing feeling of humility, a continual "knowing" of what needs to be known, and a continuing living from and through the heart. In short, God's presence made manifest in the depths of our lives and not merely superficially. Even with the adept this is not perfect, because none of us are perfect. And this process does not lead to perfection, it simply brings us closer to God and leads to and sustains communion.



Healing

Healing is defined as a restoration of balance, the emergence of health, the bringing about of a state of peace and harmony and freedom from disease and injury. Healing occurs on physical, emotional, and mental levels. A lack of healing in the form of sickness or injury is simply a lack of balance or harmony. Healing is actually the process of restoration and may occur through ordinary or extraordinary means.

All Healing is from God. The human being has as part of its design an internal mechanism for healing, in the physical sense, in the emotional sense, and in the mental sense, but we tend to heal at different rates and in different ways. Some people seem more vulnerable than others, or more vulnerable in some ways than others. Cause and effect relationships for disease and injury or emotional distress are generally not readily apparent. Disease and injury do not seem to be a simple matter of genetic factors and mechanistic opportunities. Consequently, there is an underlying causal framework that remains beyond our ken. But the healing process, and God's central role in healing are more apparent and more important.

Implied Lessons. Some would say that all disease and injury relate to lessons needing to be learned. In which case healing is a learning process. This doesn't mean that we are being punished or that we deserve to be sick or injured. What it means is that every sickness and every injury and every upset are opportunities for learning, either by intent or otherwise. Health is important because when we are healthy we are generally much more effective in learning, growing, and serving. Virtually all of the traditional Christian practices and principles encourage health and healing. And virtually all of our experiences in life are opportunities for further healing on some level or another. One might

even say that simply **being separated from God is an imbalance, and that we need to return to harmony with Him in order to be fully healed.**

God and Healing. Healing occurs on every level and in every way according to the grace of God, and through His instruments human and otherwise. Without God, healing simply does not occur. The manner of His grace may not be apprehended, but the fact of His grace is easy enough to appreciate. As we approach God our propensity for healing is improved, we become more receptive to God and therefore more receptive to His healing presence.

Miracles. Miracles may be unusual, even extraordinary, but they are not supernatural in any sense. God works miracles. With gifts and blessings on every level. Like other forms of healing, miracles occur not because we want them to occur, but because God wills for them to occur. If we get entangled in intellectual pursuit of understanding cause and effect relationships we lose sight of the underlying reality which is God.

Healing Presence. God is peace and harmony. God is goodness. As we approach God we participate more fully in His presence, and that is inherently a healing presence. We are healed to some extent through prayer. We are healed to some extent through every meditation. We are healed to some extent through every acknowledgement of His presence. And as we embrace that presence, that presence flows through us and we become instruments of His healing presence. That doesn't make us important. It doesn't mean that we are special. It just means that God will utilize us in accordance with our ability to be used, with our ability to be receptive and instrumental. And sometimes even in ways where we are not actually receptive.

The Paradox of Healing. In some sense we must be healed in order to properly approach God, to properly approach Christ. In some sense in approaching Him we are healed. The two go hand in hand. If we have "baggage" then we find it difficult to approach Him. As we work through our limitations, with His blessing, then we are healed. And as we are healed we are better able to approach Him. This also means that the most substantive barriers to healing are what we must mostly overcome, namely our selfishness,

our self-centeredness, and our ego nature. As we move beyond ourselves, we approach Him and we are further healed.



Humility

The Most Substantial Barrier between us and God is our lack of humility. And the one thing that we can do that works the most in this regard is to embrace humility. This is also one of the most difficult things we could possibly undertake, especially if we are isolated and lacking the continual encouragement of the scriptures and the fellowship of the church.

Lack of Humility. Our lack of humility arises mostly from the illusion that we are separate from God, that we are independent and self-determined entities. We are not. We are in fact one with God, we simply don't generally realize that it is so. We are not independent, in any sense. God provides everything that we have and every experience and every opportunity. **All blessings are through the grace of God.** One might be tempted to say that we earn things, but in fact that is an intellectual exercise that undermines the greater truth of His grace. It is our lack of humility that separates us in consciousness from the one God deep within us. It is our lack of humility that enslaves us in materialism and sense experience and intellectual endeavors. It is our lack of humility that breeds glorification of human accomplishments, instead of acknowledging these as God's gifts through us.

Humility and Humiliation. Humility is not the same thing as humiliation. There is absolutely no weakness in being humble or in embracing humility. To the contrary there is great inner, spiritual strength in being humble, in embracing humility. The lack of humility is weakness. And humiliation is

simply the reaction of the ego to an experience that fails to support the ego sufficiently according to its needs. But the ego is an artificial entity. An illusion born of the perception and belief that we are separate and independent entities. The ego is not real. As this is realized, as one becomes more humble, then it becomes impossible to suffer humiliation. If we do not embrace the ego, if we do not engage the ego in our daily lives, we are simply more receptive to truth and reality which is God's presence.

Humility is in a sense the absence of ego, the absence of self-centeredness, the absence of the illusion of separateness. **Humility is simply feeling God's presence everywhere and at all times and in all ways.** The ego is a barrier, a very complicated barrier with rather subtle and self-deceptive means. Satan works through the ego. It is where we are the most vulnerable to temptation. As we grow spiritually, as we progress in our spiritual growth, as we progress in our embrace of centering or contemplative prayer, we become emptied of all the false things that are born of ego. We become a vessel empty of the unreal nature of things, and we are therefore filled with the truth and reality of God.

Without Humility we see and feel and think to some extent through the ego. With humility we see and feel and think much more clearly. Actually, with humility we see and feel much more clearly and we do not actually think at all. This doesn't mean we are mindless, but it does mean that our mind is clear and receptive, that we can rely on our conscience and our spiritual intuition, which are gifts from God and the voices of our Lord.

Awakening. In another sense it is our lack of humility that puts us to sleep, that keeps us engaged in pursuit of personal and worldly objectives, that keeps us entangled in the ways of ego and the ways of the world. In order to wake up we need to discover God's presence and so dwell upon that presence that we stay awake. Anything that contributes to our awakening is good. And anything that draws us back into ignorance, into the state of being oblivious to God's presence, is evil. Through experience and the grace of God, we realize what helps us to awaken, what helps us to embrace God's presence more fully each day. Through experience, and the grace of God, we embrace the process of refinement, we embrace daily prayer and meditation, we embrace daily Bible study, **we learn to breathe each breath as God's presence.**

The Import of Centering Prayer is quite considerable if undertaken properly and conscientiously. It helps us to disengage from our worldly entanglements. It facilitates living in the world effectively, spiritually, without being entangled with worldly things and worldly experiences. We have things and we do things, with appreciation for our blessings, but we are relatively free from these things as entanglements. Through proper prayer and meditation we gradually awaken to the deeper and greater truths and realities of God. This doesn't mean necessarily or generally that we have any real intellectual appreciations, but that we feel God's truth and reality more fully. And that we are better able to embrace these things and express them through ourselves, allowing God to more fully live through us.



Knowing

Many Christians base their sense of Christianity in faith. They believe in God and Christ because they choose to believe or want to believe or simply believe. Perhaps it is because their parents or friends believe. Perhaps it is because they have read the Bible and have been inspired to believe. And many Christians base their Christianity in logic or reasoning. Perhaps they have thought about it and convinced themselves of its validity. Or they have been convinced by others. Perhaps for more than one reason. Perhaps for no reason at all.

Faith is Helpful in approaching Christ, because faith is rooted in the heart. Reasoning is also helpful in approaching Christ, but reasoning is not based in the heart. It is based in the head or intellect. And reasoning is not infallible. **Truth is whatever truth is.** Believing in something doesn't make it true.

Convincing oneself by virtue of logic or reasoning is not the same thing as embracing truth. Just because it is reasonable doesn't make it true. Just because everyone else believes something doesn't make it true. It doesn't really matter. What matters is what is actually true. And what matters on the personal level is what one truly believes. Through faith, or reasoning, or knowing. Because what one believes then serves as a basis for how we live our lives.

Power and Truth. If what we believe happens not to be actually true, then the only power of that belief comes from ourselves. But if what we believe happens to be actually true, then the power of that belief comes from God. **For God is true and God is truth.** In approaching and embracing what is true we are also approaching and embracing God. This is not about things that are superficially true, things that don't really matter, but about things that do really matter, which are true and have depth and significance.

As One Deepens Spiritually, as one approaches Christ, through prayer and meditation, through centering prayer, through contemplative prayer, through whatever ways and means are appropriate for us, one moves from believing or from reasoning to something much more convincing, namely knowing. One simply knows in one's heart what is true. And that knowing is not encumbered by our desires or by our thinking, by what we want to be true or by what we rationalize as being true. It is simply being receptive to God. It doesn't matter if we can communicate it or not to others. It doesn't matter whether or not others believe or know as we do. It only matters that we are there. That we are indeed embracing Christ deep within ourselves. That we are receptive. That we heed His calling.

Knowing and Understanding. We may know things without understanding how or why we know things. We may know things without even understanding what we know. Understanding is not as important as simply knowing. We know that God is real. We may not need to understand where God came from or what God is all about. What we need to understand is simply what we do understand. And what we know, truly, is simply what we need to know, truly.

Wisdom. One might say that understanding is more important than simple knowledge. One might say that wisdom is more important than simple understanding. Wisdom is a matter of conscience, of embracing the wisdom that emerges from God within. It is not about knowing anything in any intellectual sense. It is about being.

The Key to truly knowing, the key to enlightenment or wisdom, is simply embracing one's heart in the deepest sense. This knowing is not about faith or reasoning. It is not an intellectual knowing. **This knowing is about true feeling. The feeling of God within us.**



The Heart

Grace and Communion. As a Christian, one might say the most important aspect of all this is that we are saved by His grace. And the second most important aspect would seem to be that of spiritual growth or living according to Christian principles. In the Christian contemplative tradition, this leads ultimately to achieving communion with Him and living from the heart.

Living from the Heart. If we are living from the heart then His life flows through us unimpeded by our more human limitations. If we are living from the heart we feel His joy and comfort and serve as an encouragement to others. If we are living from the heart we are incapable of judging others, of criticizing others, of hurting others. If we are living from the heart we do not separate ourselves from others, whether they are Christian or non-Christian, we feel a fellowship with all of God's creatures in this world. If we live from the heart we live for Him and for others more so than for ourselves.

Temperance. In order to live from the heart we must allow God to temper our lower nature. We must embrace whatever is good and noble in our nature and open our hearts to further development and unfolding. We must continue to seek to live as He would live in the world. And in living from the heart we find ourselves more and better able to live constructively and meaningfully. All blessings come from God, but in living from the heart we participate more fully in His greatest blessing, which is His love for all of us.

Being Human. Of course we don't do this living from the heart perfectly. We remain human. We continue to have limitations. We continue to learn and grow. We continue to experience challenges. But in living from the heart we are better able to meet those challenges, through His grace. In living from the heart we approach God. **In living from the heart we allow Christ to live through us.** We allow His will to supercede our own.

Courage and Truth. In living from the heart we are blessed with the courage to face the truth, however painful it may be, to see things more clearly. In living from the heart we are blessed with the courage to do the right thing, to live according to our divine conscience, according to our more noble principles.

Relationships. In living from the heart one cannot persecute others. In living from the heart one does not think less of other people, regardless of their circumstances. All lives are perceived in the light and love of God. One can only feel compassion for others. For God is love and compassion. God is gentleness and graciousness. Those who think poorly of others or who separate themselves from others are simply not being receptive and responsive to God's presence. With God's presence there is peace and harmony and goodwill toward all.

Through the Grace of God, we are Forgiven

Through the Grace of God, we are Saved

Through the Grace of God, we are Healed

Through the Grace of God, our Hearts Unfold

III

Miscellany

This third series of articles simply fills in some of the gaps and expands upon some of the themes from the first two series.



Marriage

Marriage is the mutual relationship of a husband and wife, in principle a partnership of equals sanctioned by God and to which both husband and wife are fully and eternally committed. In practice many marriages are relatively superficial, either because the couple are not fully committed to each other as equals and partners or because God is not allowed to play a central role.

Equality in marriage is important. It doesn't mean that each should contribute to the marriage in the same ways or that any contribution can ever or should ever be measured, but that each should perceive the other as an equal and that both are fully committed one to another and that marriage is a sharing of one's life in every way. It means that neither party dominates, but that each contributes substantively to the union, to the partnership. We have each come to where we are through different experiences, through various paths, and we each have different natural and developed talents and interests. In a proper marriage partnership there is considerable mutual appreciation for the common core as well as for the differences that also contribute to the whole.

Spiritual Basis and Common Core. Perhaps the most important ingredient in a successful marriage is having a substantive spiritual basis, leading to substantive core values, the ethics and morals and principles and values that provide the foundation upon which to learn and grow and serve together. In a proper marriage there are three principals, the husband and wife and God or Christ. **A proper marriage is sanctioned by God and infused with His love.** But to be effective, that means that each must respond to that infusion of love by fully embracing God and each other. A marriage without this proper spiritual basis, without the Lord being acknowledged and embraced

at the center, without the focus being upon God, is likely to remain relatively superficial.

Love. It is easy to say that love is a requirement for proper marriage. It is another thing to actually embrace love truly and fully. It is not enough for each to simply love the other, or for each to be truly in love with the other. These are necessary but not sufficient. What really matters is that God's love provides the foundation for the marriage. Human love is actually simply the extent to which we are able to embrace love. Most people embrace love superficially and this "love" simply comes and goes. True love endures. **True love is fully embracing God's love.** God's love for each of us. As we fully embrace God's love we are infused with His love. One's heart is filled with love for God. One's heart is filled with God's love for us. And one's heart is filled with love for one another. And one's heart is filled with love for friends and family. And so on. God's love is not small. As we embrace God's love it simply flows through us, especially strengthening and purifying the bond of marriage and especially strengthening and purifying the bonds that we have with our children.

Children. It is not necessary for a married couple to have children, but we are certainly encouraged to have children in the context of a proper marriage. Our greatest blessings start with God's grace and His love for us, then as God's love embraces our partnership and children, then our larger context of friends and family and community. True marriage partnership, sanctioned by God, is a tremendous blessing. So too are our children. The partnership and family provide the means for our Lord to provide countless opportunities for learning and growing and serving.

Adoration. Some Christians would say that adoration is reserved for our relationship with God. Others would suggest that adoration of God can and should extend to one's partner and children. In this sense, adoration is a more poignant intensification of our ability to love our partner and children, through His love. A couple who truly adore each other are able to embrace love more deeply and more enduringly than those for whom love is more superficial and transient. The fruit of adoration and the central focus upon God, is that it endures.

True Love doesn't come and go. It doesn't fade. **True love grows and deepens as we grow and deepen together.** Or, more correctly, our ability to embrace love grows and deepens as we grow and deepen together, spiritually. Certainly there are challenges and difficulties and tests and trials throughout our lives, but in a proper marriage relationship our relationship with God provides the ways and means to work through these challenges and difficulties, learning and growing in the process.

Living from the Heart. This is another way of saying that God's love and presence bless the marriage. As we embrace God and live more truly from and through the heart, we embrace and express all of the qualities of the heart, and these serve to strengthen the union and make the marriage relationship even more meaningful. Living from the heart means being gentle and kind. Having respect and consideration and compassion for one another. Trusting and admiring one another. Never judging or criticizing or otherwise harming one another. Embracing the concept that God is the most important factor in our lives, and that our family is very much part of that factor. That worldly externals are not so important. In a proper marriage God, the marriage, our children, and living from the heart according to our Christian principles, are vastly more important than anything else.



Humanism

Humanism is a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values, especially in the secular sense of a philosophy that asserts the dignity and worth of the human being and the human capacity for self-realization through reasoning and human accomplishments.

The Human Being is indeed a noble creature with many positive attributes and capacities. The human being has inherent dignity and worth. The human being has the capacity for self-realization. And human beings have accomplished a great deal. But the problem with humanism is that it focuses on the human being without much regard for God who has created the human being and who sustains life on earth and who provides every blessing, including each opportunity and capacity for accomplishment. Thus every human accomplishment is more properly God's accomplishment through the human being. When a person focuses on his or her own accomplishments, beyond merely the need for self-esteem, there is the cultivation of ego, and a lessening of any appreciation or recognition of God as Creator and Facilitator.

Separativeness. Another problem of humanism is that in emphasizing human accomplishment the humanist tends toward separativeness or the illusion that we are separate from God, the illusion that we can function independently of God and to some extent from one another, when in fact we are not ever separated from God and we are all interdependent within God's embrace of humanity.

Humanism and Materialism. In some sense humanism is simply an extension of materialism, that what one sees and feels in the objective world is all there is. Superficially there is a material world. Superficially the human being is prominent in this material world. Superficially we are conditioned to think that this is all there is. But in fact, the material world is but the façade for something much greater, namely God's manifestation. And the human being is but the façade of something much greater, namely God-who-lives-within-us. Without humility, without even modesty, the human being tends to think that this is a world to be exploited rather a world to be nurtured, that we have dominion over the world rather than being merely stewards. In fact, we do not have dominion over this world. In fact, we are stewards of the world, of the environment, and of all natural and financial resources. And as stewards we are accountable for the efficacy of our management of all these resources.

Humanism and Humility. While the human being is an inherently noble and distinguished creature, while we should always treat each other with dignity and respect and consideration, while human nature may need some

sense of self-esteem, the humanistic perspective is dangerous because it tends to undermine the very thing that brings us closer to God, namely humility. If we glorify the human being and human accomplishments then we tend to feed the ego which separates us in consciousness from our Creator and our Savior. If we think of ourselves as self-determined we lose sight of the greater truth.

Self-Delusion. There is another unfortunate aspect to humanism, and that is the humanism exhibited by those who are sincerely deluded by their faith such that they embrace the ego and separateness all the while believing that they are humble and filled with God. The indicators are fairly easy to see if one is actually looking. Those who are head-centered cannot therefore be heart-centered. Those who impose or convey their own judgment on others are simply not living in Christ. Those who are self-righteous instead of being merely righteous, those who think less of others and separate themselves from those who do not believe as they do instead of feeling Christ's compassion for all, similarly. In humility there is both truth and realization.

The Cure for Humanism is not the denial of human worth, but rather a more modest appreciation for the human being, without glorification, coupled with a focus and emphasis upon God and Christ and living as He would live, through the heart, with mercy and compassion and consideration for others, regardless of their circumstances or beliefs. With appreciation for the human being in the greater context of God living through us.



Evangelism

Evangelism is a word well-known to many Christians, but which can mean different things to different people. To some it has a negative connotation,

especially in the sense of imposition of beliefs. But to many it is a healthy and appropriate practice, indeed an essential practice. Basically, evangelism is the winning or revival of personal commitments to Christ. It is a central practice of the Christian faith. But differences arise in terms of methods and fervor.

Evangelists. Evangelism derives in some sense from those who are considered the original evangelists, who were the writers of the four Gospels. In the more general sense, an evangelist is anyone who evangelizes, i.e., who preaches the gospel or who witnesses in the sense of offering encouragement to others to embrace the Christian faith through personal commitment to Christ. Thus the root of evangelism rests with the Gospels, of emphasizing and teaching salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ, through personal conversion, the authority of the Holy Bible, and the importance of preaching as contrasted with ritual.

Encouragement and Imposition. Evangelism is not, strictly speaking, about conversion to Christianity, but about embracing Christianity. It is not about the falseness of other beliefs, but about the truth of the Christian faith. It is not about imposing beliefs, but about encouraging others to find the truth in Christ. It is not about numbers of people, but about the quality of one's relationship with Christ. Thus the true evangelist is simply an instrument of Christ who encourages others to embrace the Christian faith. It seems to me that the way of Christ is by gentle encouragement, not through argument or challenge or imposition. Thus to me evangelism is about sharing, about witnessing, about caring, about encouragement. It is, properly, an expression of the heart. It is also about living as Christ would have lived, embracing Christian beliefs and principles, as best we can, and by so embracing our faith and practice that we serve to encourage those around us by virtue of how we live and practice that faith.

Fundamentalism. There is nothing fundamentally wrong with evangelism or with fundamentalism, but these two things are not actually entirely the same, and both practices can be abused through militant or crusading zeal. Evangelism is about preaching the gospel. Fundamentalism is about having strong, fundamental beliefs. But when one goes too far, in extremis, then that suggests to me that the ego has taken hold and that these practices have

become rather separative and imposing. Thus it seems to me that gentleness and humility are the keys to proper Christian practice, which is also proper evangelical practice.

The Angel. Perhaps one should keep in mind the central role of “angel” in evangelism. The evangelist is like the angel or messenger of God on earth, bringing forth the good news of the Gospel, sharing gently, offering encouragement, but not imposing. For the imposition of beliefs is never a genuine conversion. If one believes something because it has been imposed, then it is not a genuine embrace of Christianity. A genuine embrace of the Christian faith requires a genuine realization of the truth. If it is not felt in the heart, with faith, then it is not real. The angel is a gentle creature, a servant of God, who facilitates healing and realization and salvation. The evangelist is also, properly, a servant of God, who preaches the Gospel, gently, humbly, without recourse to ego or self-interest or self-will.

Commitment and Revival. There are actually two very significant dimensions to evangelism, namely the encouragement of initial personal commitments to Christ and the encouragement of renewal of those commitments. It is not simply a matter of “winning” souls and counting their numbers. A soul won to Christ must also be nurtured. Many drift away and lose their faith. Many more practice their faith more-or-less superficially, through church attendance or fellowship, without actually and genuinely embracing their faith or deepening and growing in their faith. Thus the role of the evangelist is both to encourage realization leading to personal commitment, and to encourage continual renewal or revival of one’s faith and practice.



Fear

What is Fear ? There are a number of kinds of fear, with substantially different contexts, evoking substantially different feelings. There is “fear-of-God” which is really simply profound reverence and awe toward God. This is actually or should be a good feeling. There is instinctive fear, which is evoked through awareness of genuine danger. And there is self-induced fear, which is an unpleasant and often strong emotion caused by anticipation of danger, real or imagined, with emphasis on anticipation and imagination.

Fear of God begins with reverence and awe toward God but also evokes conscience and consideration for our relationship with God. It is not actual fear, but appreciation for God’s omnipotence and omniscience. This tends to evoke and develop the conscience, given our knowing or understanding that God has supreme awareness and is a witness to all that we think and feel and say and do. A true conscience does not permit us to do inappropriate things just because there are no witnesses. A true conscience is God’s guiding light for righteousness in the context of our relationship to God.

Instinctive Fear is a natural response to stimulation that is perceived at an unconscious level to be threatening in some way. Instinctive fear is mostly genuine, based upon real perceptions and circumstances. Instinctive fear is inherently self-protective, and rooted in the personality. Instinctive fear is not entirely hereditary, but can arise also through experience and conditioning. The proper response to instinctive fear is to validate the threat or circumstances, and not allow the imagination to compound the problem. Then to take proper action.

Self-Induced Fear is not a genuine response to stimulation, but, rather, is evoked through conditioning, as concerns are compounded by emotion and rationalization and imagination such that one becomes conditioned to fear, and predisposed to perceive and interpret things fearfully and therefore unreasonably. With self-induced or conditioned fear our perceptions are compounded by fearful imagination and we lose the ability to think clearly or to perceive things realistically. With self-induced fear we tend to withdraw from normal human relationships and limit our "exposure" to a few friends and family. This fear is both debilitating and limiting. It inhibits growth and learning and fellowship. And it inhibits realization of truth. It also forms a barrier between us and God.

With Fear we tend to imagine and to some extent attract awful, dreadful, frightful, terrible, and appalling things. It is one thing to be wary or cautious. It is another altogether to be fearful. And in many cases where we are fearful, we behave according to underlying fearfulness, without actually being aware of the fact that we are fearful or that we are behaving in concert with our fear. Fear breeds anxiety and lack of courage. Fear breeds reluctance to relate to people in healthy ways. Fear also tends to breed unhealthy aversions. But self-induced fear is necessarily based in ignorance. We tend to fear things that are beyond our experience, beyond our current understanding, things and people who are different from our experience. In ignorance our imagination compounds our perceptions. But in being truly open to God's truth, which is everywhere, we learn and grow and we are not then the victim of fear.

Without Fear, we are free to presume that someone is honest and sincere unless there is objective evidence to the contrary. With fear, it is different. With fear we tend to imagine the worst, even if there is no objective evidence. Thus the real problem with fear is that it tends to distort our perception and interpretation of things. We see something innocent or circumstantial and we perceive it to be threatening or significant. The problem is that with fear we cannot effectively discern between what is genuinely threatening and what is merely circumstantial, and with fear we unconsciously perceive things in the worse possible way and then consciously or unconsciously act as if it were really so.

Fearlessness comes in either of two ways, either through arrogance or through our genuine faith in God and Christ. Fearlessness based in arrogance is both foolish and futile. It is an artificial fearlessness that further limits our ability to see the truth of anything. But fearlessness that is based in God and Christ is a natural consequence of our faith.

Genuine Fearlessness is accompanied by prudence and humility.

Inexplicably some Christians are fearful, because they do not actually embrace their faith. We are human, after all. And truly embracing our faith is not necessarily so easy. But when we do actually embrace our faith, sensibly, we enjoy the comfort and protection of our Lord, and our fears fade away quite naturally. It doesn't mean there are no dangers. It just means that we are free to perceive genuine dangers as they appear in fact, and not as they appear through conditioning or imagination. And it means that we are guided by our Lord through whatever dangers or challenges there may be.



Divorce

Divorce is the legal and spiritual dissolution of a marriage. Divorce is sometimes a challenging consideration in the context of the Christian faith. If one takes the Bible literally and absolutely there are a number of apparent contradictions relating to divorce. Only if one takes the Bible to be divinely inspired rather than entirely literal and absolute can one actually reconcile matters. But one should not also simply interpret the Bible for one's own convenience. One should always seek guidance through prayer. The intellect that merely reads and interprets the Bible is often too conditioned to apprehend the truth. But with humility, prayer can be quite revealing.

Biblical Basis for Divorce. The marriage covenant is sacred. Marriage is intended to be enduring. But for a Christian couple the Bible provides for divorce in the case of repeated fornication (adultery) and in the case of abandonment. But the Bible does not literally anticipate other sufficient causes for divorce, for example, abuse may be considered a form of abandonment and abandonment may be considered to include emotional isolation. The Bible reveals Jesus as having mercy and compassion. So one can, in principle, sincerely infer what Jesus would do or say given particular circumstances. Our Lord provides salvation in many ways, not the least of which is through the joy of communion with Him. True happiness is not about getting what we want, but rather, it is about living properly as a Christian and embracing His joy. Which leads to the question of what to do where there is no basis in marriage for embracing the Lord together.

Healthy Marriage. If God is truly present in the marriage, then the marriage will be necessarily successful and enduring. A healthy marriage is healthy for both partners and their children. It provides a wonderful framework for learning and growing and serving, together. But not all marriages are healthy. Many people enter into marriage casually or without the maturity and commitment that is necessary to a healthy marriage. Not all marriages are blessed by the Lord, because not everyone is responsive to the Lord. Not all couples are able to seek guidance, together, in prayer. An unhealthy marriage may very well be in some sense a place of learning and growing, for one or even both spouses, but a truly unhealthy marriage is not a healthy place for children, nor does it allow the proper embracing of one's faith. This is not to say that where only one person is a believer, the marriage is therefore necessarily unhealthy. The Lord can work miracles, and sometimes even a bad marriage can become good. But sometimes miracles do not occur. Without the presence of our Lord, even good marriages can become unhealthy.

Togetherness and Dissolution. In a true Christian marriage the Lord is present and acknowledged and embraced by both partners. There is a growing together, a mutual commitment and connectedness that simply grows and deepens. But there are at least five things which tend to disrupt a marriage, to undermine that connectedness. The first is simply the absence of the Lord, where one or both spouses do not acknowledge Him and embrace Him. The

second is adultery or fornication or infidelity, which is extremely separative, that tends to destroy whatever connectedness there may have been. One simply cannot romantically or sexually embrace someone other than one's spouse without severely undermining the sanctity of the marriage. The third is abandonment, where one spouse simply leaves the other, physically and/or emotionally, abandoning his or her commitments and responsibilities. The fourth is abusiveness, which can be, substantively, either physical or emotional or both. Adultery, abandonment, and abusiveness are all unconscionable.

Anomalous Marriage. The fifth factor that tends to disrupt a marriage is that of anomaly, where one's spouse is directly or indirectly antagonistic to one's faith and principles and values. This is not in any sense an excuse for divorce. But if true, it can be substantial grounds for divorce. In an anomalous marriage there is simply no spiritual basis for the marriage, no basis for connectivity, for learning and growing and serving together. Even without other factors (adultery, abandonment, abusiveness), if the Lord is not truly present in the marriage then this anomaly undermines the ability of the believing party to fully embrace the marriage and allow His presence in the marriage. An anomalous marriage is not merely the absence of the Lord, but the strength of one or both spouses as egos. Individual willfulness is not the way to cultivate the Lord's presence.

Discouragement of Divorce. I believe the intent of scripture with regard to marriage is to encourage and facilitate "true" marriage, a place of learning and growing and serving and deepening in one's faith, and to encourage the honoring of one's commitments. And I believe the intent of scripture with regard to divorce is to discourage divorce except where a marriage has truly failed and cannot be revived or sustained, where the marriage is simply not a healthy place and cannot be expected to become a healthy place. Those who more rigidly interpret scripture might say that one should simply persevere and pray for the Lord's intervention and blessing for the marriage. And I would ask does the Lord truly wish for someone to endure such genuine pain and suffering and for how long? Moreover, I would suggest, that where there is no possibility of genuine happiness in a marriage, through any of these various factors, then the Lord would show mercy and compassion and release a husband and wife from their marriage vows.

The Divorce Process. I do not recommend divorce, except under extraordinary circumstances (adultery, abandonment, abusiveness, anomaly) and where every earnest effort has been made to save the marriage. But where a marriage cannot be saved, then one should proceed as considerately and respectfully as one can towards one's spouse, and in the very best interests of any children of the marriage. An amicable divorce is possible, if both parties are reasonable. Many divorces are harmful to children, not by virtue of the divorce itself, but by virtue of the lack of consideration of the divorcing spouses toward each other, and the lack of consideration of both toward the children. If the marriage is truly unhealthy, then a divorce may very well be more healthy for all concerned, including the children. If the marriage is not healthy, then one should first make every effort to make it healthy. But if that ultimately fails, then one should make every effort to make the divorce process as harmless as possible.

Failure and Judgment. Human beings are inherently imperfect. We are inherently sinful. Christians are not necessarily any more or less perfect than anyone else, or any more or less sinful than anyone else. We all fail, in some things and at some times. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Yet the Lord is gracious and merciful and compassionate. As Christians, we are forgiven our sins and encouraged to grow and deepen spiritually. But that does not make us inherently any better or worse than anyone else. Yet many Christians tend to be self-righteous and judgmental. Some view "divorced" people as inferior, to be shunned in some sense. Sometimes in subtle ways, without even being aware of how they are discriminating. Some feel threatened by those who have failed in some way, fearing it is contagious. But failure is not contagious. What matters is not whether or not someone is divorced, but whether or not someone has embraced our Lord and is genuinely trying to live a Christian life. Not according to someone's rigid interpretations of scripture. But according to the guidance of scripture and according to the guidance of the Lord within us.

Remarriage. A divorced person is not contaminated by virtue of being divorced. A person who is a genuine Christian, who happens to be divorced, is no less a Christian by virtue of being divorced. And should be as free to marry

as one who is widowed or who has never been married. But one who is divorced should take stock of the lessons afforded by the failed marriage and in taking those lessons to heart, in the event of remarriage, be fully and enduringly committed to the Lord, and to the new marriage, in every way.



Ignorance and Enlightenment

Ignorance is defined as the state of lack of knowledge or the state of lack of intelligence. The problem of ignorance is that much of the evil in the world is rooted in ignorance. Ignorance can be exploited. And coupled with egoism, ignorance can be extremely dangerous. One who is both ignorant and driven by ego is almost entirely separative and unresponsive to the Lord's presence and the teachings of our faith. Worse, one who is a professing Christian and both ignorant and encumbered by ego, is one whose ignorance is compounded by confidence or certainty in one's righteousness and one's convictions. Indeed, those who give Christianity a "bad" name in the secular world are those who are both ignorant and encumbered by ego. Such "Christians" as these tend to be judgmental and self-righteous and unresponsive to divine guidance. They also tend to be the more visible and vocal "representatives" of our faith.

Enlightenment. At the other extreme are those whom I would call the enlightened Christians. Those who are both intelligent and humble. This is an extremely difficult combination to achieve and there are so very few who are indeed both intelligent and humble. As one grows in knowledge and experience, as one grows in intelligence, the ego also tends to grow. Tempering the ego is not easy. Almost everything in the secular world tends to encourage ego and undermine the tempering of the ego. We tend to be led astray in so many ways and through so many means. But both scripture and genuine prayer encourage and facilitate humility, provided one is truly earnest, and provided one is truly

receptive. Without humility, without openness, it is impossible to be enlightened. Without humility it is impossible to truly approach the Lord and be truly receptive.

Four Cases. At the risk of over-simplification, may I suggest four combinations of these two dimensions of ignorance-intelligence and egoism-humility. The very worst case would seem to be that of being both ignorant and egoistic. To be ignorant and encumbered by ego is to be vulnerable and blinded by what one believes to be true, without being able to discern the actual truth. The next worse case would seem to be that of being both intelligent and egoistic. At least with some intelligence there is the potential for understanding that one doesn't truly know something, and the potential for realization of the encumbering role of ego. The next best case would seem to be that of being both ignorant and humble. With humility there is more potential for growth, for growing in knowledge and experience and understanding and intelligence, without being encumbered so much by ego. And the very best case would seem to be that of being both intelligent and humble, where one is truly receptive to divine guidance. In short, humility would seem to be more important than intelligence, and intelligence would seem to be preferred to ignorance, but not at the expense of humility.

The Life Cycle. It seems to me that we come into this world blessed with both ignorance and humility. As children, and hopefully throughout our lives, we continue to learn and grow. I believe this is an important part of the purpose of life, especially in the sense of learning and growing in the context of our faith. But the tendency is to allow the ego to displace or mask the natural humility with which we are born. Thus we should be ever and always self-vigilant, to continually endeavor to temper the ego, to continually embrace the natural humility of the soul.

One of the Areas in which we should be vigilant is with regard to matters beyond our immediate and considerable experience. Even where we have knowledge and experience, we rarely if ever have sufficient knowledge and experience to truly and fully and completely understand something. To proceed or to speak on matters beyond our immediate and considerable experience tends to undermine our own ability to recognize and embrace truth. The assumptions

that we make, consciously or unconsciously, tend to lead us into compounded ignorance, i.e., to be ignorant of the fact of our being ignorant. Some Christians tend to speak poorly, and therefore ignorantly, of other denominations or other religions, without any real appreciation for how little they know and understand of the matters of which they speak. People hear things, or read things, and lacking the ability to discern the truth, proceed as if what they have heard or read is actually true. Believing that a particular person is of good character and would not lie, one might assume that what is being said is true, without realizing that the speaker is simply sincerely saying what he or she believes to be true, but what may not actually be true. Many people make assumptions or leap to conclusions, without any real appreciation of the truth. It is so easy for someone to read and hear or observe just a little bit, and then infer a great deal, that is simply not true. One must be careful with regard to truth. One should ever always seek guidance from our Lord, that we might cultivate the ability to better sense the truth.

The Pervasiveness of mutual misunderstanding that exists between many Catholics and Protestants, or between Christians and Muslims, for example, is based almost entirely in ignorance. Sharing one's faith in the form of attacking another's beliefs is inherently counter-productive. It seems to me far better to genuinely learn of another's faith, and share gently one's own faith. One need not be afraid of another's beliefs or practices, especially if one is truly grounded in one's own faith. There is no inherent contradiction between having a strong Christian faith and being open-minded. It is when our minds and hearts are closed that we cease to learn and grow, and cease to be receptive to our Lord's presence in our lives.



Sinfulness

Sin is whatever separates us from God. Living in this world, being human, we are inherently sinful. Materialism and egoism and self-interest are all potential or contributing factors. But as we grow and mature, we develop a God-given conscience that guides us in matters of righteousness, in matters of legality, propriety, ethics, and morality.

Harmfulness. In another sense, sin is simply that which is harmful. To others. To oneself. To animals. To the environment. One can argue over what is harmful and to what extent something is harmful, but many of these arguments are based on self-interest as well as understanding and maturity. Harmfulness includes both that which is harmful in the physical sense and that which is harmful in non-physical ways. Thus dishonesty is considered harmful because it undermines one's ability to perceive the truth. It undermines our ability to perceive and understand God. Likewise coarseness.

Diversity of Sinfulness. Causing harm covers such a broad range and diversity. Killing someone, raping someone, assaulting someone, stalking or terrorizing someone, harassing or otherwise abusing someone, threatening someone, criticizing someone, judging someone, hating or despising someone, shunning someone, being unfaithful to someone, lying to someone, imposing on someone, libeling or slandering someone, stealing from someone, cheating someone, manipulating someone, divorcing someone (without cause), abandoning someone, vulgarizing someone, being selfish, smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs in the recreational sense, lying to oneself, lying to God, profaning God, and manifesting self-righteousness, are all sins of one sort or another.

Degrees of Sinfulness. Some might argue that some of these are not as harmful as others or indeed that some of these are not necessarily harmful at all. What is actually understood as harmful is gleaned ultimately from experience, from reading the scriptures, from what we are taught by our families and teachers and peers and through our culture. The more refined we are the more perceptive we are likely to be as to what is actually harmful. The closer we are to the Christian ideal the more likely we are to understand what is and what is not sinful. Some of these “sins” are unambiguous to most people. But some may be perceived as a matter of degree. For example, how much criticism is actually harmful? Based on my own experience, I would suggest that all criticism is inherently harmful, but few are likely to agree with me on this.

In Principle, all of these various sins or harmful practices are within our control. In principle, we can choose to be nice and decent and not “do” any of these harmful things. In practice, our understanding of what is sinful or wrong varies quite a bit one from another, especially with regard to the more subtle practices. And in practice, our ability to live in accordance with conscience, with what we know or understand to be proper, varies as well, one from another and from time to time.

Judgment. One of the problems of the self-righteous is that of how to deal with adversity, especially the adversity that others have experienced. It is really quite very easy and almost natural for one to say that raping someone is unconscionably harmful, a sin a great import. It is relatively easy to judge a rapist rather badly, even though in some sense that judgment is in itself a harmful practice. But the self-righteous tend to go well beyond such judgments, and shun also, perhaps even in subtle ways, one who has been victimized by a rapist. Perhaps they think, almost unconsciously, that surely such a victim is not blessed by God and must herself be sinful? Wrong. Very wrong. When one is victimized, with or without apparent cause, one can understand this. One should instead not judge. One should simply live as Jesus would live, embracing others through compassion and mercy and consideration. That doesn't mean associating with villains. But it also doesn't mean shunning victims.

Sin and Circumstances. There is a very great difference between being sinful, i.e., having a sinful nature, hurting people, on the one hand, and being in adverse circumstances, on the other hand. For instance, many fundamentalists condemn or shun those who are divorced, even those who are divorced in the Biblical sense, without realizing that it is sometimes simply a matter of circumstances, that one can be a victim of marital circumstances. It is almost as if divorce or any adversity is contagious. That one might be contaminated by association. Now this might be somewhat understandable in the case of murderers and rapists and other coarse people. But this is not understandable to me with regard to those who are truly nice and decent and not “doing” harmful things, yet still be in adverse circumstances, or “be” divorced. It seems to me that the Bible teaches us many things, including embracing the mercy and compassion of Christ. Perhaps “judging” others is only our human nature, but why do so many people judge others speciously or superficially, based on appearances and apparent circumstances, without knowing and understanding a person and his or her character and nature and values. To be righteous is the ideal. But to be self-righteous is unconscionable (believing or feeling this about self-righteousness is, of course, also a judgment, and inherently harmful).



Ecumenism

Ecumenism refers to embracing ecumenical principles and practices, especially with regard to various denominations within the Christian faith and in some instances, to some extent with regard to all the various world religions. Ecumenical principles promote or encourage worldwide Christian unity and cooperation, and if applied beyond the Christian faith proper, to harmony among the various religions of the world.

Diversity. The diversity of Christianity would seem to be both a blessing and a curse. A blessing in the sense that Christianity appeals to so many people, in so many different ways. It would seem that for every taste there is a denomination or congregation-within-a-denomination that is appealing to someone or another. But a curse in the sense that the fractionation is also separative. The spectrum of Christianity is really quite substantial, and ranges from very conservative to very liberal. One can only wonder what Jesus makes of all of it.

Exclusiveness. One of the problems is that of exclusiveness, of one or a group thinking that he or she or they are somehow better than others or special or “chosen” by the Lord. Even if this “thinking” is not conscious, it can and generally does manifest behaviorally as separativeness. Exclusiveness and exclusivity are glammers relating necessarily to ego. And separativeness is a sin as it is inherently harmful, both to one who is separative, and to whomever is shunned or excluded or pushed away. This doesn’t mean that one should associate with people whose values or nature are contrary to one’s own, but it does mean that one should view everyone with compassion and consideration. To treat anyone disdainfully is wrong. It separates us from God. For God lives within and through all of us.

Inclusiveness. The real key to transcending exclusiveness is embracing inclusiveness. This is a major import of the New Testament. That God is a unity as well as a trinity, that Christ loves all of us, regardless of whether or not we all embrace Him. That we are in this world collectively, and that we have a responsibility for helping others according to genuine need, and according to our abilities and opportunities.

Christian Diversity. One of the real strengths of the Christian faith is its diversity. There are many and different denominations. The dynamic range of the Christian faith is huge. And all contribute to what is Christianity. There are three major branches, namely the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the various Protestant churches. Protestant faiths consist in some historical-organizational sense of three branches, namely (1) Anglican, leading to Episcopal, Methodist, Holiness, and Pentacostal churches, (2) Lutheran, and (3) Reform, leading to Presbyterian,

Congregationalist, and Baptist churches. Within each of these there are additional denominations and denominational relationships. But what they all have in common is Christ. Some are rather conservative, some are moderate, some are entirely liberal in their doctrine and understanding. Some are very Christ-centered. Others are predominantly humanist. But each nonetheless has a place in the whole. And none have an exclusively correct understanding of anything.

Three Kinds of Christians. In another oversimplification I tend to think in terms of there being a spectrum of Christianity, where at one extreme there are very (very) conservative Christians who tend to be judgmental, self-righteous, separative, isolated, fearful, distrusting, intolerant, and rigid. At the other extreme are the self-serving humanists and superficial Christians who are neither devoted to the Lord nor serious about their faith. In the middle are the majority of Christians, genuine Christians, who tend or seek to live from the heart and embrace gentleness, kindness, and compassion, who are both tolerant and embrace inclusiveness.

God and Christ and Truth are far greater things than our merely human understandings. With humility we realize this. With humility we realize that our own insights and understandings may not be complete. We still have room to grow. By being attached to particular beliefs we prevent further growth. On the other hand, by having beliefs only loosely held we are hardly moved by our faith in meaningful ways. So it would seem important for us to have strength in our faith, but not to be so rigid that there is no room for growing and deepening. In genuinely embracing God and Christ we truly find peace and harmony, within ourselves and with regard to those about us, with peoples of our own faith and denomination, and with others who do not believe necessarily as we do. The ecumenical spirit is essential to the manifestation of this God-inspired peace and harmony.



Hope

The World is not an entirely pleasant place to be. There is pain and suffering for many peoples. There are nefarious entanglements of materialism and egoism. Many are entangled in their senses. Most of us are self-absorbed or self-centered or selfish in some sense or another. And usually it is only when we realize the futility of worldliness that we begin to realize the truth of God and His message for humanity.

All Religions offer to facilitate relationship with God. All religions offer hope in some sense or another to their adherents. And there is some not inconsiderable truth in each religion. God lives and works through all faiths and all lives, to whatever extent we are receptive and responsive. In Christianity things get relatively more personal, as we realize the need for forgiveness, the need for salvation, the need for healing. And as we embrace our faith we are rewarded with hope. There is revealed to us the light and love and power of God. We are saved and yet we continue to learn and grow and serve, because in Him we live and we are moved to do these things. We find hope and we share that hope.

The Basis of Hope is found in God's grace. It is not simply about salvation. To focus entirely or even mostly on one's own or others' salvation is to miss the depth and breadth of the Christian spiritual experience. God's grace is much bigger than that. There is prevenient grace involving repentance and awakening. There is justifying grace involving the forgiveness of sins and regeneration. And there is sanctifying grace involving growth in holiness, of deepening in spirit.

Nurturing Community. A Christian is characterized by the fact of his or her faith and salvation. But what truly characterizes a genuine Christian is not the fact of his or her salvation, but the fact of his or her living a Christian lifestyle, of deepening in spirit, in living from the heart, contributing to a nurturing community. For it is only as one allows Christ to live through us truly that we are fully Christian. This is not simply a matter of caring for those within our own community or fellowship, but extending that warmth to every opportunity for healing and nurturing others, regardless of their faith. One of the reasons I have been drawn to the United Methodist Church is this doctrinal sense of nurturing community, though it is of course not necessarily embraced effectively in every congregation.

There is Hope conveyed through salvation, but most people need more than that in order to live meaningful lives. The encouragement of friends and family, in the context of a nurturing community, also provides hope. Thus it seems to me that we have a continuing need to be part of a nurturing community, to nurture and to be nurtured. There is some not inconsiderable sadness in this life and world, loneliness and isolation also, if we allow these things to take hold of us. But there are also great joys in life, as we more fully embrace and express the gifts of God.

Through the Grace of God, we are Forgiven

Through the Grace of God, we are Saved

Through the Grace of God, we are Healed

Through the Grace of God, our Hearts Unfold

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