

Mysticism and Morality

by James Stewart

We can regard the doctrine of union with Christ not only as the mainstay of Paul's religion, but also as *the sheet anchor of his ethics*. Critics of the Apostle, from the days of the Judaizers downwards, have attacked him for the alleged antinomian tendencies of his Gospel. Their case against him might be put in some such words as these: "You preach a Gospel of free grace and unmerited forgiveness. But are you not thereby condoning sin and encouraging moral laxity? When you say that Christ is our substitute, bearing the penalty of our misdeeds so that we may go free, are you not cutting the nerve of all ethical endeavor? If every sin of man provides God with a new opportunity of showing His sovereign grace in action, may not the sinner console himself with the reflection that his evil ways are actually promoting God's glory? May he not say, '*Let us do evil, that good may come; let us continue in sin, that grace may abound?*'" (Rom. 3:3, 6:1).

Paul, who was aware that such interpretations were being put upon his message, bluntly calls them calumnies (Rom. 3:8); but others besides captious critics have raised the question. It is a real difficulty. Does the Pauline evangel have a strong enough hold on the primal moral duties? Was it not a risky proceeding, to say the least of it, to eliminate the Law and trust the Spirit, as the Apostle did? Those who originally challenged him on the point had practical evidence to support their case: for certainly there were antinomian Christians in the early Church, people to whom the new religion was mainly an emotional excitement, a little private luxury with no real reaction on life and conduct. Very probably it was against such a group that the striking words were written, "*I tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the Cross of Christ*" (Phil.3:18); and there were members of the Christian community at Corinth who regarded participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as securing for them all the blessings of salvation both here and hereafter, and thus exempting them from a too scrupulous attention to moral duty and self-discipline.

Right through Christian history the workings of this spirit can be traced; men have found it easy to shelter their sins beneath "*the imputed righteousness of Christ*." They have used a phrase like "*not under Law, but under grace*," to blur the otherwise disturbing fact that God is holy and that there is such a thing as the moral stringency of Jesus, and have persuaded themselves that to an orthodoxy of creed, coupled with the cry "*Lord, Lord*," the gates of the kingdom are bound to open. So the Christian faith has been wounded in the house of its friends, and the terribly damaging divorce between religion and ethics has past a slur on the Church's name. "Religion without morality," says Otto Kirn very forcibly, "is emptied of its true content and value. Unless the Godhead is the source and safeguard of the moral life, it is not a reality to be revered at all, but merely the object of a mythical play-acting, and the worship that men offer descends to a selfish currying of favor or to superstitious magic." Or, in the blunter words of Bishop Barnes, "religion without morality is a curse and a snare."

Plainly, then, the antinomian charge brought against Paul is a serious one. And yet, there is one factor in the apostolic Gospel which, even alone by itself and unaided, absolutely rebuts the charge and tears every criticism of the kind to shreds. That factor is union with Christ, union in His death and resurrection.

For to be united to Christ means to be *identified with Christ's attitude to sin*. It means seeing sin with Jesus' eyes, and opposing it with something of the same passion with which Jesus at Calvary opposed it. It means an assent of the whole man to the divine judgment proclaimed upon sin at the Cross. It means, as the writer to the Hebrews say, "*resistance unto blood*." It means, as Paul put it tersely, death. In face of all this, to find antinomianism in Paul is simply to caricature his Gospel.

Moreover, it follows from everything that the Apostle says about redemption and the Redeemer that the man whom Christ takes into fellowship with Himself is from that moment *possessed of an ethical motive of the first order*. Compromises and moral second-bests can no longer satisfy him. That blessed intimacy of Christ is daily putting him on his honor. Just as Zacchaeus found that he could not possibly remain in Jesus' company unless he too ^{M.1} steps immediately to straighten the tangle of his life and make restitution to those whom he had' wronged, so the man who enters into the living union with Christ which Paul has described finds it absolutely necessary, if that relationship is to continue, to bring all his other personal relationships on to a new footing of reality and sincerity and moral truth. It was therefore to the strongest of inward motives that Paul was appealing when he wrote, "*If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God.*" For, as Dr. Oman remarks, "to call Jesus Savior is in the same breath to call Him Lord." A great salvation begets a great love in the heart of the saved: and love's characteristic is that it would rather walk the narrow road of honor than any broad primrose path whatever. *Love turns the discipline of life into romance, the Cross into a shining splendor, and the cutting edge of Christ's morality into sheer glory and joy. Thus union with Christ supplies an unparalleled ethical motive.*

But, declares Paul, it does more. Along with the motive, *it supplies the power*. To be "in Christ" means that Christ is the redeemed man's new environment. The human body, by the acts of eating and drinking and breathing, is continually drawing for its strength upon the resources of its physical environment. So the Christian spirit, by prayer and worship and surrender, makes contact and keeps contact with its spiritual environment, which is Christ: thus the soul draws for its strength upon the supplies of power which in Christ are quite inexhaustible. "*I can do all things*" it says, "*through Christ who strengthens me.*" Faced with the strain and stress of the moral struggle, surrounded by stubborn hereditary foes, torn sometimes on the rack of almost unbearable temptation, it lifts its head and cries, "*Thanks be unto God who always causes us to triumph in Christ*" (2 Cor. 2:14). Strange, surely, that such a Gospel, built on such an experience, should ever have been called indifferent to, or subversive of, morality! The wildest flights of parody could go no further. The fact is, the Gospel as Paul preached it holds a moral dynamic that is the one hope of the world.

It should be added, however, that the possession of this motive and this power in union with Christ *doesn't mean the end of the Christian's striving*. Rather it is a challenge to an effort as long as life itself. You are in Christ, Paul tells the Corinthians, but still you are only "*babes in Christ.*" By virtue of their conversion, they had entered the sphere of eternal life; but material things, especially the body of the flesh, still hemmed them in. Only when this body had been exchanged for the spiritual body, waiting to be revealed beyond death, would their full liberty in Christ be realized.

The Christian's standing in Christ, according to Paul, is a great and glorious fact; the man who has entered that union knows that what he is experiencing is beyond all challenge or denial—it is truth. But in the very moment of experiencing it, the truth passes over into a command. His relationship to Christ sustains him. It is a fact, but it is also a duty. It is a present reality, but also a beckoning ideal. It is a land of milk and honey, but also a desert where men go up for Christ's sake to do battle with their tempter. Its indicative is, "*Thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee*"; that is the glorious fact which nothing can shake or alter! But the indicative bears at its heart an imperatives strong, ringing, challenging: "*Thy light is come. Then—arise, shine!*" "*Are you in Christ?*" says Paul to the believer. "Then be a man in Christ indeed!"

One further point remains to be noticed. The! experience of union with Christ, as Paul describes it, *looks beyond the present to the future*. It is a blessed and glorious experience here, but it points on to something still more wonderful to come. Never in this world can

the believer know all that the fellowship of Christ may mean. Even while he is "*a man in Christ,*" he is conscious of a yearning for a deeper intimacy. Even while he enjoys eternal life as a present possession, he dreams of the fullness of life that will be his when the shackles of the flesh and its frailty are gone forever.

Mystics, it is often said, have no use for eschatology: they are absorbed in what they have, and are not concerned with any future consummation. That such generalizations are unwise and misleading is made plain by the experience and teaching of Paul, whose mysticism has an eschatological coloring. Titius has brought this point out well. "The Spirit is but seal and earnest of the coming glory, sonship still awaits its perfecting, even communion with Christ is still an 'absence from the Lord'; and righteousness, peace, and joy, in which the kingdom of God consists, become downright misery, if the resurrection hope is taken away" (*Der Paulinismus*, p.21).

Here Paul and the fourth evangelist join hands. The keynote of the Johannine literature is eternal life. This life resides in Jesus, who communicates it to men. "*He that believes on the Son has*"—here and now—"eternal life." But this does not rule out the conceptions of future resurrection and judgment and glory. "*No man can come to Me,*" says the Johannine Christ, "*except the Father which has sent Me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.*" Now according to W. Bauer, in *Johannesevangelium* (p.38), these forward-looking passages in the fourth Gospel are a mere concession to the strength of popular ideas. It would be much nearer to the truth to say that the references to the future stand where they do, not in spite of the dominant idea of eternal life in the present, but just because that idea finds in them its complement and full significance.

Both Paul and John were convinced that a life so glorious as that which in Christ they already enjoyed must one day, in the mercy of Providence, break its bands asunder and leap clear from all limiting conditions whatever, and be crowned by God in heaven. For, as von Dobschütz has put it, "Christianity is—and will ever be—the religion of sure salvation, brought by Jesus and to be experienced by His believers already during their present life. This does not exclude Christian hope. On the contrary, the more present salvation is experienced in mankind, the stronger Christian hope will be" (*Eschatology of the Gospels*, p. 205).

What we are seeking to emphasize is that eschatology does not begin where mysticism ends, nor does its presence argue a defect in the mystic's position. In point of fact, it proves the vitality and intensity of his union. It is not because he has had so little of Christ that he yearns for more. It is precisely because he has had so much of Christ that he is sure God intends him for the perfected experience. Hence the same man whose daily thanksgiving was that "*it pleased God to reveal His Son*" in him could also hope for a day "*when Christ, who is our life, shall appear.*" The Apostle whose faith centered in a Savior, risen and alive and present, could also express: "*a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.*"

There is really nothing incongruous about this: vital Christianity, from the days when Jesus preached the Gospel of a kingdom which was at once a present reality and a future hope, has always held the two positions together. Paul knew that what had entered him, on the day of his conversion, was life of the eternal order. He possessed it: it was there. Yet Holtzmann is perfectly right when he says that "biblical religion in general, Pauline in particular, is a *thirst* for life." Conscious as the Apostle was of Christ's real presence, not only in the sacraments but in all the joys and sorrows and vicissitudes of the common day, a presence that was an unflinching gleam of glory in his soul, he still could declare himself "*willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.*"

When he spoke of faith, which was the outgoing of the soul towards God, and of love, which was its outgoing towards men, he also spoke—to make the trinity of religious experience complete—of hope, which was its outgoing towards the final redemption. A day is coming, he declares, when the union, so wonderfully established here, will be flawless and unhampered and complete, when the last clinging relic of a material world's power to dim the vision and interrupt the harmony and spoil the sanctity will be blown away on the winds of death, and when the last veil of weak mortality, hiding the ultimate mystery, will be rent in twain by God's own hands from top to bottom. Then indeed, out of the cataclysm of that hour, there will arise a soul "in Christ"! *"So shall we ever be with the Lord."*