

Live And Let Live

by Richard Zenith

The saying that titles this article, “Live and let live,” never appears as such in the Bible, but you can find many Scriptures that express the same idea. Jesus said that we are not to judge lest we be judged, and Paul recommended that we each follow our conscience concerning the eating of meat and that we let others follow theirs. He says in Romans 14:3,4—

The scrupulous [those who don't eat meat] must not condemn those who feel free to eat anything they choose, since God has welcomed them. It is not for you to condemn someone else's servant: whether he stands or falls it is his own master's business; he will stand, you may be sure, because the Lord has power to make him stand.

The idea is pretty clear: you live your Christian life as seems best to you, and let me live mine, for the Lord Himself is our strength to make us stand firm. Of course there are certain practices, Scripturally enjoined, that are clearly not of the Spirit, and Paul gives instructions for casting unrepentant sinners from the Church. Such cases are rare, however, and it is not our place to keep tabs on our Christian brothers. To those of us who know that the life we live is really Christ's, “live and let live” is basically a good policy.

You hear the saying everywhere, not just among Christians. At least once a week someone says to me, “My philosophy is to live and let live,” or, “You do your thing and I'll do mine,” or “Different strokes for different folks”—which are all different ways of saying the same thing.

But how many of us “do our thing” with *gusto*;; how many of us really live? And do we truly encourage others to go in their own way, without our interference? I'd like to consider the last question first, by looking at some concrete circumstances.

Situation #1: *Sara, your daughter, has said she wants to be an architect, and you have been saving money to help finance her education. While applying to colleges, she tells you that what she really wants to study is Art History.*

“Why suddenly Art History?” you ask.

“I want to learn about Tibetan sculpture.”

“How did you get interested in that?”

“Last week I saw a book in the library.”

You calmly explain that she needs to think realistically about what she will do after college. You yourself studied a liberal arts course that got you nowhere in the job market, so you ended up managing a store. Not a bad job, though you feel you could have done better if you'd taken a business degree. She listens and says:

“I'd be miserable as an architect.”

“And as an art historian you'll starve! Feasting your eyes on Tibetan masterpieces won't satisfy your tummy.”

You've always wanted Sara to be an architect, and you know from her talent for conceptual design that she could be a good one. You also know that she is fickle and that this whim may not last. But right now she seems adamant, and the deadline for applications is almost up. What do you do?

She's at your mercy, for she's been depending on you to pay her way through school. You can probably pressure her into applying to study Architecture, but that will make her resent you as well as her studies. On the other hand, it would gall you to fork out your hard-earned money for what seems to you a frivolous endeavor.

Although not fully mature, Sara is a responsible adult. Or maybe she is not entirely responsible, but then she must become responsible by making her own decisions, which naturally will include many mistaken ones. Children can learn from their parents' experiences, but never quite as well as from their own.

There's something more fundamental, however. In order to "Let Sara live," you must let her go. You must recognize her as a unique being in Christ. Although as your daughter she bears many of your characteristics, at heart she is an expression of Christ, not an expression of you.

You are probably right that Sara will not stick with Art History, but she might very well be miserable as an architect. She doesn't know exactly what she wants, but you don't know either! Let her study what she thinks she wants, and encourage her to go to a college where there are other courses (including Architecture, perhaps) which she may finally decide to pursue instead.

Don't use your money to manipulate her, but be honest with her and yourself. If it bothers you to subsidize her "useless" studies, then tell her that you will pay only the first year (so as not to leave her in the lurch, since she's been counting on your funds). Afterwards, you can loan her money. It's also not a bad idea for her to develop financial responsibility by working to help pay part of her schooling.

Even when they are quite young we should see our children as individual personalities and not as extensions of our own egos. We indeed have a tremendous influence over our children, and the thought of it makes me tremble! How do I discipline my son without stifling him?

Answer: love him, be with him, teach him by example. Parents, especially fathers, are often absent in person and present only in word. They think that teaching children is a matter of teaching a set of principles. That's a good way to end up with narrow-minded, not to mention love-starved, children.

When a child sees your morals and values in action, then he naturally appropriates these to his own situation. Rather than a narrow set of rights and wrongs, he will gain a keen sense of which way he should go in each situation he faces. And he will not feel confined by rules. The rule will be formed inside him.

The rule (you guessed it!) is Christ Himself. Children who see their parents depending on the inner Christ just may be able to avoid a lot of the junk we had to go through. They will still have to make their own mistakes, and sometimes serious ones, but I'd rather have a creative child who gets into everything, including trouble, than a repressed and lifeless creature. Of course they need some discipline, but let's not stifle them. If we don't give our children room to be themselves now, it will be all that much harder for them later.

"But they're young! They get out of control!" Good! That's how they'll learn self-control.

"What about teenagers who are unruly and rebellious?" That's healthy and normal. Don't feel that you're failing as a parent. You're probably doing a pretty good job as long as you can keep them out of jail and out of the newspapers!

Situation #2: *You have a high-paying government job. Your husband George minds the house, cooks meals, and takes care of Joey and Jill, ages four and two. One evening he announces that he is going to work as a cashier at a supermarket. Holding back your laughter, you ask how much it pays. Minimum wage to start.*

"It's absurd," you tell him. "We'll have to get a second car so you can get to work. Plus a babysitter. It will cost its more money than you'll make!"

"I hope to work my way up in the organization—like you did in government."

"A supermarket manager doesn't make half my salary," you point out. "And what about the kids?"

Your husband threatens to walk out, though you doubt he has the guts to. Then again, you thought you had him well-trained, but now he's gotten feisty. What's your next step?

Start shopping for another car so George will be able to get work. It's cheaper than alimony, although money's not the issue. The issue is George's sense of self-worth. For whatever reason, he's no longer satisfied being a house-husband.

George loves you and your children, but he feels the need to produce as a working man. Were he to sacrifice his career hopes for the sake of Joey and Jill, he would end up resenting them. The children will be fine with a baby-sitter, as long as you make more time for them in your schedule, instead of expecting your husband to do all the parenting.

Does *Situation #2* seem odd? Does it seem perfectly reasonable that George should want to work outside the home? Then you got the point! For it's every bit as reasonable that women should want the same.

There's nothing wrong with being a housewife or a house-husband, and few creative projects are as rewarding as child-rearing. As long as one is happy as a full-time parent, great! Wonderful!

But it is also perfectly acceptable to want to work doing other things, and we should respect our spouses' desires. "The two becoming one" is not the whole picture. The two do become one, but each one is still an individual who stands complete in Christ without his or her mate.

The notion of a sit-at-home wife as somehow traditional or God-given is quite contrary to what our history books and the Bible tell us. Women in ages past may have stayed close to home, but they weren't sitting! They planted the fields, cared for the livestock, and made everything from clothes to soap. They were much more than mothers.

Since most women in our society do not need to hoe the field or milk the cow, it is only natural that many of them wish to do something besides turning on the oven in order to get bread on the table. The working woman (outside the home, I mean) has become the norm, not the exception. She has successfully penetrated every vocation and profession—witness Geraldine Ferraro, in 1984, as our first woman vice-presidential candidate.

Nor is it only in modern times that we find women in leadership positions. One of the first and best judges of the Israelites was Deborah, and during her reign Sisera, the enemy leader, was delivered into the hands of the woman Jael, who had enough pluck to drive a tent peg through his skull (see the fourth chapter of Judges).

We are free from predetermined roles. Let's encourage one another to follow our God-given longings. Rather than molding our spouses into our own or any other image we conceive, we ought to stimulate them to realize themselves even more fully than before marriage.

Why do we try to control others' lives? Why do some wives and husbands constantly find fault with each other? Why do we worry so much about our grown children's career and marriage choices? Why can't we let our loved ones live their own lives?

Isn't it often because we haven't lived our *own* lives? We find fault with others when we don't feel good about ourselves. We want our children to do great things (what we think is

great) to compensate for our own failed lives. If we live our own lives to the full, it is much easier to let others live theirs.

Our first responsibility is to God, our second responsibility is to ourselves, and our third responsibility is to our family. The second must come before the third, for we know ourselves better than we know them. Get the order mixed up and we will foul up their lives as well as our own.

“Be strong,” Paul tells us (1 Cor. 16:13), for only then can we fulfill our responsibilities to others. The world’s problems are not caused by strong personalities like Hitler; they are caused by weak ones who let the Hitlers come to power.

“Do not conform to the present world system, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so as to sense for yourselves what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom.12:2, RSV). We are to “sense for ourselves” what is right, according to the Christ in us.

“Call no one on earth your father,” Jesus said, *“since you have only one Father, and . . . you have only one Teacher, the Christ”* (Matt. 23:9-10). So we should not conform even to the Church, but follow the Christ in us.

Live life in your own way, and always beware of majorities, especially when they claim to be upholders of morals! Imagine the Moral Majority two thousand years ago. How would they have reacted to this young man who broke the “blue laws” and overturned the temple’s money tables in a rage?

True, the circumstances were exceptional. Paul and Jesus Himself tell us to obey the civil authorities. The New Testament did not bring a political revolution; it brought a spiritual revolution. All the apostles, some of whom were *“unlearned and ignorant men,”* became emboldened by the Spirit to speak out forcefully. Paul, a one-time persecutor, is so confident of his new faith that he criticizes the likes of Peter. The early believers meet in groups and spontaneously spread this new life in Christ, in spite of the Romans’ habit of feeding Christians to lions. *“Let the dead bury their dead,”* says Jesus. For it is time to live.

Should we all be travelling missionaries like Paul and the other apostles? Not at all. *“Get up, pick up your stretcher, and go off home,”* Jesus said to the paralytic (Mark 2). And when a man who had been exorcised begged to stay with Him, Jesus refused and said, *“Go home to your people”* (Mark 5). Don’t be swayed by the words and decisions of others. You will know if God is really calling you to go out on a mission or some other project. Otherwise, stay at home with your people and work at your God-given task.

Remember that *“it is precisely the parts of the body that seem to be the weakest which are the indispensable ones”* (1 Cor. 12:22). Whatever our calling, let us do it with our whole heart. We are not made merely to “cope” in the world but to recreate it through Christ, who calls us the salt of the earth and the leaven which makes the whole loaf rise.

By themselves, salt and leaven don’t amount to much, but they give food its flavor and body. So our particular jobs may seem insignificant, yet they are vital to the whole body’s functioning. *“There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done, but always the same Lord; working in all sorts of different ways in different people, it is the same God who is working in all of them”* (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

What if our callings conflict? Consider this:

Situation #3: *Susan loves her job as a pediatrician in a Chicago hospital. Soon she will become director of the program. Her husband, Michael, is an executive for an airline that*

is not doing so well. He has just been given an ultimatum: transfer to Houston or you re out.

Some of today's marriages, which are not noted for setting endurance records, would call it quits over this. "Live and let live" might well translate into "I'll live my life in Chicago; you go live yours in Houston. So long."

But for Christians there is a reason and power for living that goes beyond our personal ambitions. Love, of course. After talking about all the ministries and gifts of the Spirit in I Corinthians Twelve, Paul finally says he will "*show you a way that is better than any of them,*" and he talks eloquently about love. All the gifts and all our knowledge will finally fail, but "*love does not come to an end*" (1 Cor. 13:8).

We live by, for and in God's love, so that our professional positions are quite secondary. If Susan and Michael are bonded by God's love they will discover what is best for their family, probably by compromising so as not to dash either of their careers completely.

Similarly, Paul cautions us not to tear one another down by our liberty but to serve our neighbor in love (Gal. 5:13-15). And if his eating of meat causes a weaker brother to stumble, then he will not do it (Rom. 14:15). "Live and let live" could just as well be phrased, "Love and let love."

Jesus said that he who loses his life for His sake will find it (Matt. 10:39), and He even goes so far as to say that we must hate our own lives to be His disciples (Luke 14:26).

This means that we must let go of our lives, forget our selves. Then, with nothing left to fear and no ego to protect, we are free to live every precious moment of this life that is Christ Himself, expressed in us through our different personalities, according as He made us.

"Live [*fully and confidently, since it is really Christ in you*] and let live [*for you know Christ is also in your brother*]."