

September 9, 1969

PROBLEMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
(another in a series)

A GLORIOUS PARADOX
by T. B. Maston

Retired Professor of Christian Ethics
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

There are many paradoxes in our Christian faith. They are central in the expression of some of the major experiences of the Christian life. We shall briefly consider three or four of these which really represent different approaches to a single perplexing but potentially very meaningful paradox.

Man was created in the image of God. Through sin that image was marred. Through union with the One who is the "express image" or the "exact likeness" (Today's English Version) of God (Heb. 1:3), the marred image is restored. While the image is restored, paradoxically the restoration is not complete. It is a process as well as an achievement.

Another way of stating the same thing is to say that we are new men but also men whom God "is constantly renewing in his own image" (Col. 1:10 TEV)--renewed but also being renewed.

A different approach to the same over-all paradox is to suggest that when man finds Christ as Savior and Lord he comes to the end of his search, but at the same time he begins a new search that will continue to the end of life. Man's search for truth is ended when he discovers The Truth who is the source and unifier of all truth. Just as truly, however, his discovery of The Truth is the beginning of a quest.

The more mature the child of God, the more conscious he is that he is on a continuing quest or search for a better understanding of The Truth. Also, the more mature we are in Christ, the more we realize we have not already attained or already been made perfect. Like Paul we feel an inner urge to press on toward the prize of the high or upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12, 14).

Again, the experience that makes us children of God is deeply satisfying but at the same time dissatisfying. The deeper our experience in the Lord, the deeper is our dissatisfaction with our present level of understanding and conformity to the purposes of God. The first and natural reaction of anyone who is conscious of being in the presence of the Lord is "I am undone...I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5).

An expression of Kierkegaard's somewhat summarizes what we have been saying. He says that the Christian can only be "on the way." He never reaches the end of the road until he comes to the end of the journey. Are we on the way?

The image restored and yet in the process of being restored, the quest or search that is entered and yet a new quest begins, the deep satisfaction coupled with an abiding dissatisfaction are sources of another paradox.

These paradoxes previously mentioned create within the Christian an inevitable tension. The more serious he is about being a real Christian in contrast to a nominal Christian the more intense the tension. It is a tension between the incomplete and the complete, the imperfect and the perfect, the partial and the whole.

The wonderful and at times perplexing paradox is that the child of God in the midst of this tension can have the peace that passes understanding. This peace stems from the consciousness that he is within the will of the sovereign God of the universe.

The paradoxes of the Christian life that may at times be very perplexing can and will become glorious paradoxes if we are conscious of the presence of the One who conquered death through death, the deepest and most meaningful of all Christian paradoxes.

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Jesus, the matchless teacher, possibly then paused for emphasis and quoting again from the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18) he said, "And the second is like it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The second is like the first in what way? Possibly like it because it was also a commandment of love. But Jesus may have meant that it was like it in importance (Matt. 22:36-39).

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It may have been that Jesus knew that the lawyer and the Pharisees whom he represented needed in a particular way the second commandment. Or, it may have been that Jesus considered the two so nearly equal in importance that both were required for a satisfactory answer to the lawyer's question. It is also possible that Jesus considered the two so closely interrelated that one was incomplete without the other.

At least, the source of our love for our neighbor is God who is love or agape (1 John 4:8,16). In the deepest sense, love or agape is the spontaneous fruit of a vital relationship to the One who is love. And we should add that the more vital and dynamic that relationship is the more love of our fellowman will characterize our lives.

Furthermore, the love of God and neighbor are so closely interrelated that the latter is the proof of the former. John plainly says that if anyone says he loves God and hates his brother "he is a liar" (1 John 4:20).

At the close of the reply of Jesus to the lawyer or as a part of that reply we find the following statement: "On these two commandments hang ("depend," RSV) all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40). Love for God and man sum up or fulfill all that is found in the law and the prophets.

For example, the basic moral law of the Old Testament is epitomized in the Ten Commandments. Those Commandments are usually divided into two groups or two tables of the law. The first table has to do with man's relation to God and the second has to do with man's relation to his fellowman. If one loved God supremely he would keep the first table of the law. If he loved his neighbor as himself he would keep the second table.

Paul pointedly says, "All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Gal. 5:14). We know by what he says in Romans that he is referring to the second table of the law (see Romans 13:8-10).

Love for God and man belong together. Love for God, or possibly better the love that comes from God, is the source of our love for our fellowman and love for our neighbor or our fellowman so inevitably follows our love for God that it is proof of that love.

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Should pastors, ministers of education or music, and other staff members of Baptist churches be primarily interested in growing churches or in developing and maturing Christians?

Actually, they should be interested in both, for it does not have to be an either/or for it can be both/and. Notice that the title does not include an "and" or an "or."

Also notice in the question above the word "primarily." If you had to make a choice which would you say is your primary or major emphasis, growing a church or maturing Christians? Some churches may be located in static or declining situations. It may be relatively easy for you to say that your major concern is the maturing of those in the Christian fellowship. You may be compared to the coach of a losing football team who majors on "building character." But what if the team is winning. Or, what if your church is in a thriving suburb and is growing rapidly. Under those conditions it may be rather difficult for you to decide which of the preceding describes your primary emphasis.

Whether or not you and I are primarily interested in church growth or membership maturity will be determined, to a degree, by our conception of the nature of the church. For example, if we consider the church as basically a spiritual fellowship, a company of the redeemed, then we will understand that there is no meaningful growth of the church without the maturing of individual members of the Christian fellowship. The moral and spiritual maturity of the members of the church can be equated with the church's growth.

On the other hand, if we think of the church primarily as a gathered or an institutional structure, we will tend to separate the growth of the church and the growth of individual church members. Growth largely will be measured in material terms such as church membership, number of additions, added physical facilities, and attendance at church organizations.

It is legitimate to measure the growth of a church in such terms. After all, the church cannot do much for people unless it enlists them in regular attendance at its varied ministries. Furthermore, active participation in the established programs of the church can be an effective instrument for the maturing of the children of God.

When the emphasis, however, is primarily on material growth of the church, the pastor and other staff members face a rather insidious temptation. Many members of the church will judge the effectiveness of the pastor and other leaders on the basis of measurable growth. And since the pastor and other staff members know or should know more about how to grow a church than the rank and file of church members, they will be tempted to bypass the members in planning and promoting a program of growth.

It may be, and usually will be, a considerably slower process to involve the lay leadership in the growth of the church. It will necessitate a great deal of patience by the professionally trained staff. It also will require more skill by them in working with people.

On the other hand, the slower and sometimes tedious and possibly frustrating process of getting members involved will contribute to their maturing. Also, the program of the church will be on a sounder basis when the pastor and other staff members leave for other fields of service. It will be the program of the church and not the program of the staff.



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