

## TWO REALMS

Awareness of the dichotomy between “the world” and “the Kingdom” is a prerequisite for Living The Life: for being on the Path or living in the New WAY, which is sometimes also called “the Christian WAY.” But as always, verbiage confuses the issue. We need to be careful not to link or lock down the concepts into some set or required vocabulary. We have some familiar words and phrases already in *The New Church*. That is good. We need to be able to communicate with each other without long, explanatory paragraphs to interrupt our thoughts every time we want to talk about the subject. But there is nothing magic about the wording. We are also aware that others sometimes use the same wording and mean little of the same things when they do. “The Christian WAY” as it is conceived and described in many circles, for instance, bears little resemblance to what I think Jesus is inviting us into.

Sorry for the preamble, friends. Even so, the confusion on technicalities is far from cleared up. It seems clear to me that Paul was trying to speak of such things all the time, and as clearly as he could. Yet his vocabulary still causes some people to turn off before they get any clear notion of what he is talking about. Paul speaks of “the flesh” – the earthy or “of nature” part of us – and in contrast to the spiritual WAY that Christ awakens in us. Some take offense, for various reasons, without even wondering how they themselves would try to describe the same realities.

In any case, and by whatever vocabulary we choose, sometimes we live with the primary concern of survival in this physical realm. If we do survive okay, that quickly morphs into concern for earthly success – acquisition of more and more physical resources: money, fame, power, influence, land, houses, cars, and so on. Then it gets more complex. From a man’s point of view, is a pretty woman a form of potential property (an acquisition); a sex object; a friend; a colleague, a possible mate? Of course, there is a similar list of possibilities from a woman’s perspective. Is a job a chance to serve; a part of vocatio; a way to increase acquisitions; a means of gaining social status; a way to gain power and influence? A job can be any or all of these things. But inevitably, the focus and emphasis will change depending on which of these possibilities is the real purpose of the individual who has a job.

All of this is loosely referred to when Paul speaks of “the way of the flesh” in contrast to “the Way of the Spirit.” And while we might quickly assert that there is nothing wrong with survival or success *per se*, Paul would just as quickly remind us that “the flesh” does not seek or obey God. It is often idolatrous, but not worshipful. It works by pride (hubris), force, coercion, control, and always some form of domination. And it is quite at home with the Seven Deadly Sins. It may often appear benign on a normal day, if things are going fairly well. But you don’t have to scratch it very deeply – threaten the survival or success very much – to discover that nature is different from spirit. It is natural (of nature) to destroy that which opposes or threatens survival. I watch birds when I get a chance. They are wonderful, often beautiful, and some of them “sing” really well. But you cannot watch any of them for very long without getting all kinds of information and illustration about what it means to be caught in nature – the way of the flesh. What we often term “the way of the world.” Birds kill each other, steal from each other, compete for food and mates and desirable territory by any means they can – without guilt or shame or remorse.

Without going into much detail, Paul sees the duality of the two realms spread far beyond this world. Because he is not a systematic theologian, as we have noted before (at least we are getting only fragments of his thinking in mere letters), Paul does not give us a full explanation of his views on such things. We do pick up that Paul sees the rebelliousness of sin (alienation from God) spread through realms beyond this earth. It all needs reconciliation – it needs to be brought back into the spiritual realities instead of the “flesh” realities. Hence many angels are “fallen.” Principalities and powers, once created to help and enhance Creation, are now working against God’s plans. Structures and authorities, once in tune with God’s will, are now dangerous and even destructive to God’s servants. I doubt if most of us would identify very easily with the way Paul puts it, but sometimes we are aware that bureaucracies are causing more mayhem than helpfulness. Sometimes we think that structures and authorities are not serving justice the way we think they should. Not all government agencies please us. Not all corporate executives seem determined to work for the common good, or even for the good of their own corporations. Well, that is exactly what Paul meant (at least part of what he meant) by “principalities and powers” and by his claims that “the way of the flesh” does not serve God’s Kingdom.

But as Paul says: “*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” (Galatians 5:22) On a good day, three out of nine ain’t bad, if we don’t have to count the whole day. In any case, these gifts or characteristics of the Spirit are not usually what is recommended for achieving survival or success in this world.

We are far from complete definitions or explanations, but I suspect these few comments are sufficient for getting us into the topic and terrain. How do we “Live The Life” of the Spirit? It is, after all, important and honorable for us to seek survival, and even some success, for as long as we live here. Jesus did not throw His life away; they took it from Him. Simplex notions that Christians should turn away from success and survival altogether are, I think, both naive and misleading. In short, I do not think that abandoning all efforts to survive or succeed is the way we Live The Life. I think that is the way we are tempted to cop out – and serve neither God nor man nor our families nor our loved ones. If in fact we no longer care about survival or success, do we still love anyone?

In Bible Study groups over the years, I have noticed that when we are studying Jesus’ life, it is sometimes easy to be “amazed” at how stupid, dumb, and wrong the Pharisees were to be so concerned for “The Law.” For instance, they were supposed to be part of a serious religious reform, but they were complaining at Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. In that same vein, it is possible for us to wax eloquent about how humans go to war and kill each other, when any boob can see that this is not “the Spiritual Way” – it is not how any of us could ever pretend to serve or love God.

So how can we be talking about “a balancing act” – about how challenging it is to live “in, but not of, the world” – when the truth is so cut-and-dried? Well, when truth gets “cut-and-dried,” it is most frequently because its advocates have lost perspective and, in the process, have forgotten many of the realities of the spectrum in which we live.

Has any benefit ever come from The Law? To be sure, we can all note the foibles and call up the endless illustrations of how humans do not keep any law very well for very long. But that is a very one-sided assessment of the subject. All civilization is based on some form of law. Every group, every institution, every intentional effort on the face of the earth depends on humans agreeing to live by certain precepts and rules. The alternative is anarchy. In a condition of anarchy, nothing can ever

be accomplished. Nobody can trust anybody for anything. Torah was the highest possibility humans had ever considered or imagined (when first introduced). If I don't lie or steal from you (etc.) and you don't lie or steal from me, all the possibilities in life are incredibly transformed. The benefit for us and everyone else (if we all keep The Law) are beyond comprehension.

If along the way (of Torah) people get more and more concerned about things that break The Law – break the Promise, break the Covenant – is that really as naive or stupid as we sometimes pretend? If we lose The Law, do we not lose everything – the Covenant with God, and with each other, that holds all real promise and possibility in life here? The Pharisees see Jesus playing “fast and loose” with the way of Torah – the way of Moses. *Of course* they are concerned! Any parent who sees “influential friends or teachers” leading their children astray gets concerned. Obviously I don't agree with the Pharisees who opposed Jesus, but assuming they were unintelligent or insincere does not make us superior to them or more spiritual than they were. It simply means that we have not thought very deeply about the real situation.

Has any good ever come from war or from killing other humans? Huge benefits, of course. To “take out” the enemy or the opposition has frequently made life safer and far more beneficial to us and our loved ones. (At least for a while.) Like the birds, humans do such things because “it works.” At least it frequently works for quite a while, if we can accomplish it. To destroy one's enemies is to have fewer enemies to contend with. And that in turn means that whatever resources are available can be shared with those we care about most, instead of being spread so thin. To pretend not to know this is dishonest and never helps any of us to see our real situation with clarity.

One of the biggest dangers of killing our enemies is leaving some of their friends or relatives alive. That invites the possibility of vengeance and retaliation. If you really care about your “own people,” you do not intentionally allow survivors who may one day come back to slaughter those you love and care about. Therefore some of our very best leaders (ancient and not so ancient) have tried to exterminate the “full line” of those considered to be enemies, in the hope of saving more lives in the long run. Nobody, least of all me, is asking you to like it or agree with it. But the question was: Has any good (benefit) ever come from war or from killing other humans? If your answer is no, then you are the thoughtless one. Humans tend to do what works. And humans are, for the most

part, an intelligent animal. Often one of the major differences between the way of the world and the Way of the Spirit is the time line. Are we after short-term benefits, or long-term benefits? That is a very significant issue, but it does indeed complicate things. The longer the long-term benefits that are being considered, the more it requires hope and faith to choose them. Patience is the second highest virtue of the Christian Life. The way of the world (or the way of the flesh, as Paul termed it) is never nearly as patient as the Way of the Spirit.

When Paul spoke of the Way of the Spirit, his antagonists frequently accused him of proposing a return to anarchy. If we don't have The Law, anarchy seems the inevitable alternative to many people. I have often been accused of the same error by people who cannot comprehend the rigors of a genuine prayer life. Telling people to pray sounds to them like a suggestion that we all go back to anarchy. And it's true; there are some who claim to be praying but only go back to doing things their own way, and then blame it on God.

The truth is, the Spiritual Way is a whole realm above The Law, and anarchy is a realm below The Law. Turning will and life over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit is not the same as going back to doing things our own way. The rigors and disciplines of obeying the Spirit are greater than those necessary for keeping The Law. Some will not or do not want to see or admit this. But that does not change the truth. Anarchy is indeed horrible, and far worse than The Law. But to accuse Jesus, Paul, Luther, Calvin, John Cotton, or Jonathan Edwards of being anarchists is completely ludicrous.

In some manner, then: To Live The Life, we are indeed in a balancing act. We continue efforts to survive and succeed, yet we constantly remain watchful and willing to take action – ready to abandon our efforts to survive or succeed – whenever the means or the methods come into conflict with the Way of the Spirit. The Way of the Kingdom, to the best of our prayerful and willing desires to understand it, does constantly challenge our sense of physical reality – of what will “work” here. To be obedient to the guidance of the Holy Spirit does continually require us to override what we think of as “common sense.” Why else would we need to pray every day? Why else would we constantly need to check in with our Lord and Savior, constantly renewing our allegiance, which includes giving Him the right to override our natural tendencies and our natural wisdom?

As always, all attempts to Live The Life begin and end with our new allegiance – our desire to turn will and life over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we do frequently need to remind ourselves that the Christian Life is not a “turkey shoot” – it is not some simplex, easy, one-moment decision to suddenly stop being who we are or what we are like. A person can be thoughtless, careless, or foolish on either path – on the Way of the Spirit or on the way of the world – but the way of the world is not stupid. It just has different goals and values.

Assuming then that “turning will and life over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit” is the top principle of our New WAY – and that we have all agreed to and accepted it as the foundational reality of the New WAY – what next?

What is next is accepting the TENSION. There is, of course, a great release and relief when we truly turn to the Spirit and begin learning to trust the Spirit, rather than ourselves, for light and purpose and values and acceptance and approval and all the rest. But what throws a lot of people off, and sometimes into confusion and a surprised dismay, is the fierce TENSION of living in the turmoil of the two realities in which we find ourselves. In a sense, we have always lived in this dual reality. But it was never as clear or as fierce before we chose to surrender our lives to the Spirit on purpose. So the first axiom, if you will – and if you wish to pay any attention to my notions about Living The Life – is to LEARN TO EXPECT AND ACCEPT THE TENSION.

Someone started the rumor long ago that once we took “Jesus into our hearts,” as we say, we would feel the love, peace, patience, kindness, etc. of this New Life. And that is true, but only on the inside – meaning, only in quiet times of prayer and meditation. That is why we look forward to our prayer times more and more, the longer we live this New Life. But engaged in the world – participating in the life going on all around us – we find ourselves in a TENSION far greater and more poignant than it was before we were “converted.” That surprises some people so greatly that it nearly knocks them back off the Path. But we are caught here – halfway (so to speak) between the realities of the Kingdom and the realities of this world. What do we expect?!

Well, what you *should* expect is a nearly unbearable TENSION. And it is an unresolvable, inescapable TENSION for as long as we are alive here. Some days the values and purposes of the Kingdom seem completely unrealistic and impossible here. We begin to tell ourselves that it was all

a dream, a naive and childish hope. There is no possibility of any form of the Kingdom – any purpose even faintly matching the will of God – that will or can survive for long in this realm. Why not just chuck it all and get back to surviving here? Of course, that is always a theme enhanced by Satan’s comments in our ears. Nevertheless, it seems realistic at the time – and in the mood we are in at the time. And what is the real theme of such thoughts? Stop working for the Kingdom. Stop believing there really is a God who cares. Stop taking it all so seriously and just do what comes naturally.

Remember the old hymn? “We should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord in prayer.” Excellent advice – hard to follow.

My contention is that we cannot turn from our doubts or our discouragement back into the blazing lights of peace and joy. We turn from them back into the TENSION. Only, it is a good – a “clean and right” – TENSION. It is not like the usual anxiety – worry from being overbusy or taking on too much because we got careless about pruning. It is not a nervousness from fear or too much “people-pleasing.” We live in a broken world, but we still live for our Lord. And so we finally remember: He lived in the TENSION too. He also did not feed everybody, did not heal everybody, did not convince or persuade everybody. He lived in the midst of fierce opposition all His life. Many people hated Him all His life. We don’t even have to mention the ultimate proof of how true this really was. What we do have to mention is that we cannot really expect it to be any different for us – and especially not any easier. The WAY of faith in this world is not an easy Way. Between the Way of the Spirit and the way of the world, there is always a fierce TENSION. We very rarely will feel like we did anything right. We very rarely will think that our choices were totally faithful. We very rarely will consider that we were loving enough, generous enough, honest enough, or faithful enough.

One last comment about this TENSION: When you are especially aware of it and sick of it and wondering why you can never be clearer about “following Jesus” the way you long to and truly want to, then know that this TENSION is very reassuring. It means that you are not far off the mark. And every other authentic Christian for the last two thousand years has lived in this TENSION too. Someday we will get out of this broken realm. But until that day, we live “in, but not of, the world.” And that means that the TENSION is fierce indeed. Never be surprised. And never be discouraged. Jesus, praying for His followers not long before He died, says: *“I do not ask that you take them out of the world,*

*but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.... As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.*" (John 17:15-18, ESV) I know that we are forever trying to change our Lord's instructions and argue with His wisdom. But after we get through doing that, here is a passage we might well meditate on from time to time, until it sinks deep within us – until we smile, accept the TENSION, and return to gratitude and rejoicing.

And so, if you get comfortable here, you flunk! If you have resolved all the issues here, at least in your own mind, you flunk! If you have made up your mind how you ought to behave in every situation and if the morals and behavior of the Christian Life are clear to you, you flunk!

On the other hand, if from time to time you surprise somebody by really caring about them, then you know Jesus is smiling and that He is working through you. If you sow seeds of hope or faith – if in some way you help to introduce or invite or encourage some person toward their own relationship with Jesus – then that will go on bearing fruit long after everything you know here has fallen apart or disappeared. Our spectrum of awareness has changed for good. Things are temporary and impermanent here. Nations rise and fall. Cities are built and fall into disrepair. Only people last forever.

"We should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord in prayer."

So, is it really possible to Live The Life? I don't know. Some days I think so; some days I'm not so sure. But what I really care about is being a follower of Jesus. No rule will suffice. No assumed demarcation between good and evil is sufficient. What does the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord ask of me in this specific situation – on this particular day – with the specific people I am dealing with? That is what I care about. I want to follow Him wherever He wants to lead me. I have taken on some obligations; I have some responsibilities. But they come and go – sometimes because of me, and sometimes despite anything I try to do. But my true allegiance and loyalty is to Jesus. That is what I care about. Following Him in some real and authentic way is the only goal or purpose I have left.

Well, that's just a cop-out, some say. They can think so if they wish. But no, that is the only thing that is *not* a cop-out.