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Living a Christian Life

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In everyone's life, there are times of stress. There are wars, revolutions, natural disasters, births, deaths, economic disasters, droughts, floods, unemployment, fires, persecution, and many other traumatic events. When these occur, there can be no doubt that people need help. Nowadays the secular world relies on government to help them out. In contrast, Christians should and sometimes do, rely on God and the church. We can rely on Him because we know he has a plan for our life, and he will guide us in hard times and good. He also promised to meet our needs. It is a documented fact that Christians handle stress and crisis far better than those who are not Christian.

To receive God's help, we are required to **live a Christian life** — one that is righteous, and by doing so we can deal with the troubles that beset us. Sadly, most people do not know how to live it. It is not an easy life, and it is only possible to live it with the empowerment and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Where do we start?

To begin living a Christian life one has to be a Christian. This means that we

have to make Jesus lord and master of our life by inviting him to come and dwell in us. We must promise to serve him when we invite him in. At the beginning, or sometime subsequent to our salvation, we need to surrender absolutely to him. This latter transaction is something that most Christians do not make (Luke 14:26,27). Jesus made it a condition for true discipleship. Why, then, do most people lead a life that has few of the rewards promised for being God's child, and at the same time have none of the coping mechanisms that God supplies to deal with the vicissitudes of life? One of my professors once said life is hard; I know it is from personal experience and from having helped others deal with the inevitable traumas of life that come.

The reason most people cannot cope is they lack the power that comes with absolute surrender. Jesus made a big issue of power. Before Pentecost, he gave his disciples power and authority to proclaim the Gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons. Before he ascended into heaven, he promised his disciples they would be clothed with power (Luke 24:49) and filled with power (Acts 1:8). This was the keeping of his promise to live with and in them (John 14:23,24). The apostle Paul was emphatic that the power he had received was the reason he was effective in his preaching and ministering. All Christians need power, and it is available. We need it so that our purposeless and passionless state can be eradicated, and so we can live an abundant life.

Another reason why people cannot cope is they do not have the knowledge they

need. The reasons for this lack are they have not been taught how to live a Christian life, nor have they tried to learn how. The knowledge that facilitates growth is available in the Bible and the many books that have been published in the past, and are being published today. Most Christians read little other than the newspaper. Both George Gallup and George Barna have documented the lack of Bible study that tells them how to live.

Then, finally, they do not know God's will. I am amazed that few people make any effort at all to ascertain it. If we are submitted to Him it is imperative that we know what his will is so we can do it. The order that Jesus' mother gave the servants in the courtyard at Cana applies to us, too, since we are His servants. "His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you'" (John 2:5).

Years ago, we did lay evangelism in the United Methodist Church (UMC), and thousands of people were saved. Most of them did not get filled with the Holy Spirit. Then, sadly, the church did nothing to help these baby Christians grow because the church did not know how and what to teach them. Pastors received an academic education that did not prepare them either to do evangelism, or to disciple those who were saved. They were not taught how to pray, how to study the Bible, the meaning of the Eucharist, how to know God's will, or how to worship. The church believed that the liturgical order of worship and baptism they prescribed would bring about an encounter with God. It did not, and could not. The Spirit of God who guides and directs prayer, Bible study and worship was

quenched or grieved, by the prayerlessness and scriptural ignorance of both the pastor and the congregation. Across the church leaders and parishioners do not pray. Few churches have had prayer meetings during the last half-century. They are so preoccupied with the “business of church” that they neglect prayer and Bible study.

Prayer is especially neglected in all church meetings. I have attended business meetings of many Christian denominations, churches, and parachurch organizations, and prayer is conspicuously absent. Michael Greene, an Anglican divine, before giving a series of lectures on evangelism at a large gathering of evangelists in the UMC, made the comment that in the three days he had been at the meeting he had observed there was no prayer and no repentance. Even though he brought this to their attention, at the end of the meeting there still was no prayer and no repentance. This lack is true across most churches and all denominations. A pastor told me recently that he went to a meeting where they prayed for 30 minutes before the meeting. He apparently thought that was great, but he was comparing it to the usual prayerlessness of meetings.

I once was president of an evangelical renewal organization. The business matters of the organizations board were always printed, handed out, and usually read before the meeting. On one occasion, I was prompted by the Holy Spirit to suggest that we spend the first several hours praying seeking God’s guidance to carry out the “business.” Interestingly, the executive secretary went into orbit.

The very idea that we would spend a half day praying rather than what the world does was completely unacceptable! It was interesting that we never spent much time, either privately or as a group, in prayer about our business.

I was also on the curriculum committee of the UMC, and we had “devotionals” that lasted a few minutes, but never did we pray seeking God’s guidance. Our job was to design the educational materials for a church of 10,000,000 people, yet I never heard anyone ask God for guidance. I have never been in a local church where we sought God’s guidance about the business of the organization. There is no difference between the work of the Christian organizations, and the secular organizations in which I have been privileged to be a leader. Jesus said he wanted the temple in Jerusalem to be a house of prayer for all nations. It was not then, and our churches are not today.

The church was not founded for entertainment or worldly business. It does not need great organs, giant choirs, great oratory, fancy comfortable decor, or great marketing schemes. It needs to be a house of prayer where the lost, battered, bruised, and suffering of our society can find rest after they have been evangelized and integrated into the congregation. They need a place where they can learn to live the life that God has prescribed for all of us. The church also needs to be a place where believers can put their faith into action and exercise their gifts.

Prayer and repentance is necessary if the church is to thrive. I have taught over and over that no relationship will thrive without good communication. Communication requires not only speaking, but also listening. Most people do not intentionally listen to God. He can speak from his word by illuminating certain passages if we just ask him to do so. Certain passages appear to contain great truth to us. It is also a fact that if we will ask him questions and then sit quietly, the answer will be illuminated as truth in our thoughts. He also communicates with us in dreams and visions. God, therefore, speaks to us in supernatural ways, and unless we tune ourselves in to his methods of communication our relationship will be stunted, or essentially non-existent. We will not know how to live rightly either.

Our relationship with God is a love relationship. Lovers want to become spiritually one, and they become one by communicating who they are to each other. Although God has no physical presence, he does have an intellectual and spiritual presence. He communicates with us supernaturally in our supernatural minds. In any human relationship we have to pay attention to the person who is speaking to us, and it certainly is true of our communication with God. We cannot refuse to listen attentively to him, or refuse to read the Bible meditatively, and expect to hear from him. As a psychiatrist, I had to pay close attention to what my patients were saying if I really wanted to hear all they were saying both verbally and non-verbally. I think it is clear we cannot see God, but we can sense his presence and feel his love for us as he communicates with us. We must

attentively communicate with him!

I started out to write about living a Christian life, but I was waylaid by the nature of our relationship with God. I now want to return to living the life God has planned for us.

To begin, I think I have emphasized the necessity of being a born again Christian. Next, we need to be disciplined. Part of our discipleship is find out who God is and what his attributes are. This is absolutely essential. When I became a Christian, I did not have a Christology – I did not know Christ. By reading the Bible I was able to learn of him and, in time, get to know him. Then, finally, I read Jim Packer's book *Knowing God*, and I really knew God.

When we know Him, we need to learn how to communicate with him effectively. Most church members do not pray, and will not pray even if you ask them to pray. In most of the prayer meetings I have attended only the pastor and one or two others pray. Then I have been to one or two churches where everyone prays. These prayer meetings were celebrations that lasted all evening. One of them finally ended at one o'clock in the morning, having started at 6:00 pm. There was singing, praise, thanksgiving, praying in their native language, in tongues, and in formal liturgical prayers. It was fervent too! Most personal prayer times last only a few minutes. Most pastors pray less than 15 minutes. To live a Christian life one has to pray unceasingly.

Next, we need to know his commandments and the necessity of obeying them. We can only learn these commandments if we read the Bible. We also need to know by reading the Word that Jesus made it easier by reducing all the many laws and ordinances of Moses into a few simple ones.

Living a Christian life requires us to obey Jesus' commandments. I have written elsewhere and I repeat myself now — we have to love rightly. Jesus told us the greatest commandment is to love God with all our being. Then, just as importantly, we are to love our neighbors and ourselves. Then he gave us a new commandment – love one another! Then he told us to show love by visiting the sick and prisoners, clothing the naked, giving food to the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, and taking strangers into our home. Finally, he told us to go into all the world and make disciples; only converts can become disciples. We have to make converts and then disciple them. He even told us how to do it – we witness with life and lip to his saving love.

Since we are commanded to be servants, we need to know God's will and how to ascertain it. Our instructions for knowing it are:

- (1) What does the Bible say?
- (2) How do we feel about it inside ourselves? Does it seem right to us?
- (3) What does mature Christian advice tell us?
- (4) Are the doors open to do what God want us to do? He will always make it

possible to carry out his will.

(5) Does sanctified common sense say for us to take the contemplated action?

It is God's will for us make disciples. We have to do evangelism by being a good witness. When we do witness to what God has done in our life, we need to offer our listeners the opportunity to become disciples. Finally, whatever we do in our life we are to be determined to do it all for God's glory. If we do the things he commands us to do, we live a Christian life.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that we do not need a theological education to learn to live an abundant life. We do need to be taught how to be a disciple. A disciple is someone who is taught. This instruction is the job of our church leaders, or if they do not know how, we must find someone who does. I was disciplined by some fellow lay people in my denomination. I also had the good fortune to have a fellow physician who gave me a tape series by Stuart Briscoe called the "How-To Tapes." These not only taught me how to pray, study the Bible, witness, and know God's will, but stimulated me to know more about the subjects he had discussed. I did this by reading the classics written by our forbears. As I researched the subjects, my knowledge base expanded into other areas that were part of discipleship. I also grew by putting what I had learned into practice. Forty-four years later I am still learning.

There is no mystery to living the life God commands us to live. It is the Holy Spirit

living in us, providing the rivers of living water (love) that will water our relationships and glorify Him. Just as we will live a life in the world, so can we live a life in Christ. He said if we live in him, and he in us, we would bear fruit and have joy. We cannot bear fruit without him being installed in us. Bearing the fruit of saved souls is God's will for us, and we can only do it if we can reflect the love of God that is in us. We need to live a life in Christ!

I do not think that we can ever learn with the church structured the way it is today. It is designed for entertainment and not for spiritual stimulation and growth. I rarely find a church where the congregation does more than sit apathetically in their pews, and are entertained by the choir and the pastor. The failure of the church to provide encounters with the living God is the reason for the decrease in membership during the last few years. The failure of the church to grow true disciples is the reason that few people come to saving knowledge of the Lord. Those that do are not discipled and remain spiritual midgets. It is no wonder that ministers do not stay in the ministry for longer than five years; and most who do stay would like to get out, but cannot because they do not have skills that are marketable in the world.

To end this commentary I beg you to live an authentic Christian life.