

A NEW LIFE FOR A NEW AGE

"But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way."
I Corinthians 12:31

Speaking to a highly competitive world, much like our own, where people are governed by ambitions that are frequently more selfish than selfless, Paul encouraged those who think of themselves as followers of Jesus Christ to use their initiative, to expand their capacities, and to develop their abilities as the gifts of God these qualities really are.

Paul was not an advocate of laziness, nor did he encourage that lackadaisical view of life which does not see any importance in the events of today or of tomorrow. "Covet earnestly the best gifts," he urged, pausing only a moment before adding, "and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way."

Paul described the more excellent way in these words: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." (I Corinthians 13:1-3).

Someone remarks, "That sounds good, but will it work?" Someone answers, "It may have worked in the old days, but it won't work today." "Why not today?" "That one is easy" comes the quick reply. "This is a new age. Technology with its emphasis upon speed and progress has put charity out of business. We don't need charity in a day when everyone can demand his rights as a human being. Why accept as a gift what one deserves as his due?" What kind of a life has the new age of nuclear fission, rocket power, and space travel brought to the world? Are people more secure now than they were before? Is life fuller and joy more complete in this push-button age than it was in the light-a-candle age? Has automation with its promise of more leisure time brought fulfillment or increased frustration to millions of people around the world? Are these questions appropriate? If they are, I am content to leave the answers to you. Assuming that you know what is going on in the world, I think I know what your answers will be.

Despite the fact that the world has entered a new age, it still looks pretty much like the old life: full of envy and strife, characterized by selfishness and backbiting, governed by the same old drives toward prestige and power. In the same old boat, humanity is still going around in circles on an angry, restless sea, largely without direction in spite of the desperate paddling with oars too thin and fragile to do the job.

High among the hopes of many for developing a new life suitable to the new age is the possibility that a new respect for human dignity can be built around a new concept of justice enforced by law. In an age where international law, such as it was, has been supplanted largely by the law of the jungle in relationships between nations, and where the natural law of God woven into the woof and web of the universe is no longer taken seriously by people who recognize only the laws they themselves have put on the books, there is a touching and somewhat pathetic eagerness on the part of people in every part of the globe to solve all of their problems by setting up new governments and passing new laws.

One thing that we learn from history is that people never learn anything from history. Laws can change things, but they can't change people. Laws can hedge people about and keep them from inflicting the worst kind of injustice and injury on their fellowmen.

More than that has never been accomplished by law. No law has ever made a man truly just in outlook and action, putting the interest of his fellowmen before his own. It takes more than a new law to change a man, and it will take more than the passage of new laws to bring about a new life for this new age in which we live.

Human selfishness is extremely resourceful. Hemmed in at one point, it bursts out at another. The lawmakers of the world have their hands full just keeping up with the new situations created by human ingenuity in evading the laws that are now on the books. Is there any real possibility that the hard-pressed instrument of law, necessary to keep men from being unjust, but unable to make them just, could offer even the slightest hope of providing a truly creative solution to the problems of our world? Only wide-eyed optimism totally cut off from the facts of history and altogether oblivious to the realities of human nature could possibly look to law, no matter how fairly drawn and how fairly administered, for the creation of a totally new life in this new age.

The Bible does not gloss over the problems of people. When the Son of God came, as the God of all history promised He would, He demonstrated a noticeably realistic insight into the nature of man. As one of His disciples expressed it; "He knew what is in man." Knowing what is in man, He went His way. Obviously, His way is not our way. When we go our way, we forget about everyone else and think only of ourselves. The Son of God went His own way, a way of sorrows leading to a cross. Always thinking of others and never of Himself, going His own way, the Son of God laid down His life for the sins of men. He was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. On the strength of His self-sacrifice for the sins of men, God has given Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue should confess that He is Lord.

Impossible as all of this may appear to be in our ordinary world of cause and effect, of selfishness and sin, every bit of it really happened. He really took the sins of the world upon Himself, and there is really forgiveness for all who put their trust in Christ, Who was crucified. The Bible plainly teaches that those who believe in Him will be saved.

To be saved by grace through faith in Christ is to be ushered into a new life, so different from the life of the world all about us that it is like being introduced into a new world. It almost scares some people to talk about it. They don't even like to think about it. Don't let it scare you. New life in Christ is what our new age needs. New life in Christ makes life worth living. It can and will make life worth living for you, if you will receive Christ as your Saviour.

New life in Christ calls for a whole new outlook on the part of everyone who claims to follow the Christ, Who said: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another" (John 13:34).

As a man who had to learn a difficult lesson the hard way, Paul set his sights on the highest spiritual gifts and there discovered the highest way of all. He made the discovery, as everyone must, with Christ in full view. Paul said, in substance, unless a man places his feet on the highest way of all nothing else really matters.

The members of the church at Corinth had a remarkably wide variety of gifts -- the gift of healing, the gift of miracles, the gift of prophecy or of preaching, and the gift of tongues. At the same time members of that church were jealous, covetous and controversial. Paul admonished them to covet the best gifts rather than the showy ones. Did you ever notice that when people covet what another has it is not the best that he has that is coveted? Paul says, if you must covet, covet the best gifts.

It is a grand thing to be gifted of God. In the diary of Dr. Andrew Bonar is a very beautiful sentence. When his brother Horatius, the great poet and hymn writer, passed away, Dr. Andrew Bonar simply wrote in his diary, "I thanked God for his gifts." Did you ever thank God for the gifts of other men? Have you ever coveted earnestly the best gifts?

The student of Greek knows that the word translated "best" is a comparative adjective, and may be rendered "the greater gifts," or "the superior gifts," implying those which promise the possessor a larger measure of usefulness. There are commanding gifts possessed by a comparatively few church members, to which all may lawfully aspire, so long as these gifts are never considered to be substitutes for the more excellent way.

The power of popular address from pulpit or platform is acknowledged to be a commanding gift. The faculty of arresting the attention of people, of directing their minds into a special train of thought, the use of language intelligible to all classes of hearers, the power of exciting emotions of fear, trust, joy and hope is not to be minimized. Let no man discount the gift of eloquence. How often has the power of oratory moved the masses, stirred the thoughtful, and decided the destiny of nations! Over the dead body of Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony so harangued the Romans with brilliant oratory that they rose up to avenge his death. Apollos, preaching with eloquence from the Old Testament, mightily convinced the Jews that Jesus Christ was the Messiah.

Connected with this faculty of public address is the gift of writing — the ability to inform the understanding, direct the judgment, move the affections, and enkindle the imagination by means of the printed page so as to work out some of the same results by the pen that the living speaker effects by his voice. A writer may yet speak and be quoted for centuries after he has passed from the scene of action. His winged words may take their flight to various parts of the world, exerting greater influence than the vaunted ability of the Corinthians who could speak in tongues.

Some people by the exercise of unusual tact, mysterious charm, attractive grace and winsome manner obtain access to the hearts of some who refuse to yield to the spoken message or the written word. Of our Saviour it is said: "... as he went ..."; "... as he passed by ..."; and "... as he was in the way." Nearly all the works of Jesus Christ were wrought as He was going some place, on the way. If you desire, covet and strive for the best gifts in order that you may help others, you will have an opportunity before you get home. "Covet earnestly the best gifts." Yearn after them. Strive for them. Try to live and serve the Lord in such a way that when you come to the end of the way you can hear Him say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Of the numerous ways there are for doing things there is always the more excellent way. In many realms the more excellent way is being sought. The reasons why the more excellent way, pointed out to us by Paul, is unknown to so many of us are not far to seek. One reason is that it is a more difficult way. That is brought out in Dr. Moffatt's rendering of our text: "And yet I will go on to show you a still higher path." Some climbing seems to be involved. And climbing is not easy. It can be dreadfully fatiguing. How much easier it is when somebody has been rude to us to give that person a piece of your mind. How much easier to retaliate than to bear the wrong which has been done to us. The more excellent way is never easy.

The more excellent way is the way of patience. "Love suffereth long and is kind." Patience is a virtue. Perhaps it is more so today than ever, for we live in an age which

is not conducive to patience. Everybody is in such a hurry over everything. Paul's way is too slow for many of us. He was more content with sowing the seed than in seeing immediate results. He was certainly like Christ in this respect. "Love suffereth long and is kind." Some can suffer long and be cross; others can suffer long and be sour; there are those who can suffer long and be stoical -- but love suffers long, and is kind in her suffering. Go to that furnace of suffering -- "the place called Calvary". Look upon the blood-stained body of the wondrous Saviour. Surely He is craving pity and sympathy and succour? Ah, "Love suffereth long and is kind." He was kind to His murderers. We hear His gracious words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" He was kind to the malefactor. We catch those thrilling accents: "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." The more excellent way is the way of love and self-sacrifice.

"Love rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth." Moffatt's translation gives us a rich thought here: "Love is never glad when others go wrong; she is gladdened by goodness." "Love beareth all things, believeth all things. Love never faileth." Sir Winston Churchill visited a bombed district in England during World War II, where the people called out: "We can take it, Winston!" That is love in action. That shell of sarcasm; that bomb of bitterness; that incendiary of insult -- can you take it? Can you cover it with love? That is victory! The man who cannot bear a blow is certainly unlike the Divine Lover, Who, "when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered he threatened not, but committed his cause to him that judgeth righteously."

"Love endureth all things." On one occasion Lord Palmerston was discussing the merits of the armies of Europe and a distinguished Frenchman said to him, "You know, Palmerston, the French soldiers are the bravest in the world." Said Palmerston, "I cannot make the same claim for the British soldier; I think there are other soldiers just as brave as the Britisher, but the British soldier is brave a quarter of an hour longer than any other soldier." He endured; he stood in the squares at Waterloo while Ney's cavalry thundered upon him eleven times and the infantry charged in five terrific attacks; he endured! That is a picture of the endurance of love. I do not understand it when men say that they were once faithful Christians, but this happened in the church, or that happened, and they confess: "It upset me, I admit it; I got offended and went out and quit." Love does not do that. Love does not retreat because the attack may be fierce, love endures all things, and because of that it "never faileth." Without love of the brand of the love of Christ, all our loud professions become mere strident noise without form or substance.

The highest way of all is the only way to a new life for a new age. Completely dependent upon faith in Christ, the new life in Christ calls for more than faith. It becomes new life, able to enlighten and transform this new age, when faith is seasoned by that rare quality characterizing the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, to which neither the ancient word, "charity" nor the modern word, "love" can really do justice. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."