

“HAPPINESS” CHRISTIANITY

A pastor friend and another neighboring pastor were invited to address a group of high school young people on the problem of pre-marital sex. My friend bluntly declared that the one reason worthy of consideration for pre-marital sex purity is that God commands it in the holy scriptures. As would be expected, this reasoning was not too heartily received. The other pastor had a much more appealing argument. Said he, “Surveys show that those who do not indulge in sex until after marriage are much happier than those who lead or who have led promiscuous live.”

Recently I was handed a little paper-backed book entitled, This Is Life. The book begins totally without religious implications. God is not even mentioned until halfway through the book. The author first sets forth his four definitions of life as follows: 1) Life is being truly human. 2) Life is being rightly related to the environment, to others and to ourselves. 3) Life is health. 4) Life is being in harmony with the unalterable laws of life. Chapter two then concerns itself with some very good prescriptions of pure air, clean water, good food and sunlight as necessary to good health. Chapter three takes up good functioning habits, as posture, exercise, rest and proper hygiene. Then in chapter four, a transition to the pseudo-spiritual is begun by introducing “right mental attitudes.” All of this eventually leads to a recommendation of some sort of religious acceptance of God and His laws as a necessary part of “really living.”

A survey of best selling religious books in recent years reveals that they almost invariably have one thing in common: the “carrot” of happiness-fulfillment in life is held out as an incentive to religious exercise. Either the sinner is promised “the good life” if he believes in Jesus, or the believer is instructed as to why his Christian life is not delivering the excitement and fun he expected, and what he must do in order to make it come up to his expectations. Two recent titles illustrating this point just came across my desk: Happiness is a Choice, and Taming Tensions.

This mania for mundane melody has also produced a swarm of quack “Christian” psychologists who are eager to uncover the subtle underlying personality traits (four types of temperaments?), the psychological hang-ups, the childhood traumas (healing of the memories?) that supposedly lie at the root of their patient’s spiritual disorders. Thousands of happiness prospects are thus busily psycho-analyzing themselves and applying the prescribed religious cure.

The present distress and disruption of family life also provides a fertile field for those who profess to hold the answers as to how to make the wife submissive, the husband loving and responsible, the children obedient, and in general, how to have a happy marriage and harmonious home.

The family seminar epidemic of recent years is not confined to evangelical Christians. Roman Catholic Andrew M. Greely says in his latest book Crisis in the Church: A Study in Religion in America (Thomas Moore Press), that evangelism programs aimed at the alienated and the unchurched should concentrate on the family unit rather than the individual. He says, “the most effective evangelization will be directed at the family unit and must involve techniques for either finding families where marriage satisfaction is high or for increasing the level of marital satisfaction.”

The Mormon Church has been riding high on the family life bandwagon for some time. Its theology, centered in a confusion of human-deity reproduction and reincarnation process, was already in the middle of the stream when the current began to flow. All they had to do was turn up the volume and make themselves more visible. This they have done with a vigour. Happy family ads on TV and radio have helped reap for them an enormous increase in baptisms.

Even the dissolute Playboy Enterprises has slanted its pitch to get in on the happy family kick, after a Louis-Harris survey showed that love and family life was top priority among men under 50.

Somehow the impression has come across to people all over the earth that men have a “right to happiness.” The American idea that all men have a right to the *pursuit* of happiness is perhaps the bud of this flower. But the men who made that declaration certainly knew that what must be pursued in hop of attaining cannot be a promised inheritance. Even so, professing Christians, ignorant of the scriptures and the true nature of salvation, have come to believe that what other can only pursue in this present life, believers can claim.

A.W. Tozer wrote over three decades ago of an “Old Cross and a New Cross”: The old cross would have no truck with the world. For Adam’s proud flesh it meant the end of the journey. It carried into effect the sentence imposed by the law of Sinai. The new cross is not opposed to the human race; rather, it is a friendly pal, and, if understood aright, it is the source of oceans of good clean fun and innocent enjoyment. It lets Adam live without interference. His life motivation is unchanged; he still lives for his own pleasure, only now he takes delight in singing choruses and watching religious movies instead of singing bawdy songs and drinking hard liquor. The accent is still on enjoyment, though the fun is now on a higher plane morally, if not intellectually.

The new cross encourages a new and entirely different evangelistic approach. The evangelist does not demand abnegation of the old life before a new life can be received. He preaches, not contrasts, but similarities. He seeks to key into public interest by showing that Christianity makes no unpleasant demands; rather, it offers the same thing the world does, only on a higher level. Whatever the sin-mad world happens to be clamoring after at the moment is cleverly shown to be the very thing the gospel offers, only the religious product is better. The new cross does not slay the sinner; it redirects him. It gears him into a cleaner and jollier way of living and saves his self-respect. To the self-assertive it says, “Come and assert yourself for Christ.” To the egotist it says, “Come and

do your boasting in the Lord.” To the thrill-seeker it says, “Come and enjoy the thrill of Christian fellowship.” The Christian message is slanted in the direction of the current vogue in order to make it acceptable to the public.”

That believers have a joy and peace which all others pursue vainly is an indisputable fact. But the holy scriptures nowhere recommend this life to be one of carnal happiness and fulfillment. Jesus’ declaration that He came that we might have life and life more abundant cannot be qualified in any sense by this world’s standards of happiness.

Consider one man’s personal account of his sojourn: “. . . In labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty *stripes* save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; *In* journeyings often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils by *mine own* countrymen, *in* perils by the heathen, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, *in* perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.” (2 Corinthians 11:23-28). The Apostle Paul certainly knew nothing of this new “Happy Christianity” when he wrote, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” “If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die.” (1 Corinthians 15:19, 32).

To many, the pot of gold at the foot of the religious rainbow is health and prosperity. God wants us all to be rich and healthy. Imagined support for this is drawn from 3 John 2. “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” But we must not suppose that an inspired writer’s wishes are also inspired, meaning that his desires are exactly the same as God’s desires. If so, then we should have God desiring that all His people were prophets (Numbers 11:29), that everyone spoke with tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5), and that Paul should go to hell to save the Jews (Romans 9:3). It is altogether right and proper that we should wish good health and prosperity for our Christian brothers. Nothing less would be Christian. But that is a long way from saying that it is never God’s will for His children to suffer illness or poverty, that the substance of the Christian life is physical health and worldly comforts.

Diligent and industrious application to one’s vocation is to be commended. In fact, we are commanded to labour not only to see that our own financial needs are met, but that we will have to give to others. Lazarus indeed died a beggar and went to heaven, but there is nothing in financial indigence to recommend us to the grace of God. But on the other hand, the rich man at whose table Lazarus begged had not the grace of God either. James has much to say about the fat cats of this world who imagine their success to be God’s approval.

Nor can we fault those who consider the body, the tabernacle of God, something to be cared for in diet, exercise, care and rest. It is indeed a wicked thing to neglect and abuse our health deliberately, especially if we do so to further carnal enjoyments.

But far too many of the health quacks of today are also religionists. They range all the way from the “faith healer” to the extreme forms of chiropody in acupuncture. I am amazed at the Christians taken in by it so much that they cease to preach and teach the gospel of Christ, instead becoming fiery evangelists for their latest health fad. What could be the origin of something that so effectively turns hearts away from the gospel of Jesus Christ? The enemy of our souls is quite willing to have our bodies strong and healthy at the expense of our spiritual welfare. “And he gave them their request; but sent leanness unto their souls” (Psalm 106:15). Whatever form it takes, when God’s people become primarily concerned about the cares and comforts of this present life, they become spiritually weak and impotent. It is indeed a spirit that obsesses us with health and prosperity, even a religious spirit, but it is not the Holy Spirit.

But what is the practical outworking of an evangelism that assures you that you can eat your cake now and have no less goodies in the hereafter . . . if there is one? A gospel that says it is more fun to be a Christian than to be a sinner? That the good life which Jesus promised is exactly what the carnal flesh longs for? Failure on every count!

Consider the pastor’s assertion that people are happier who keep themselves pure. All it will take to blast that theory in the minds of young people is to encounter one pair of free-swingers living together with broad smiles on their faces. It provokes strong suspicion that we are naively ignorant or plain dishonest when we assert that unregenerate people do not enjoy their sinful lives. In either case we destroy the credibility of all the gospel we preach with such nonsense. We should get this fact settled in our minds once for all: The sow’s hankering for the wallow will be satisfied in the mud and nowhere else. The sinner has no tastes for the joys of Christianity and is totally unable to relate to them. “That evangelism that draws friendly parallels between the ways of God and the ways of men is false to the Bible and cruel to the souls of its hearers.” (Tozer)

Nor do the approaches through “Christian” psychology or “Spirituo-therapy” fare any better. People may be helped to get over a few mental and emotional hang-ups, but if their spiritual lives have never been reborn, if they have not been converted to Christ, radically and finally, one demonic oppression will simply give way to another. The victim will only be transferred from one form of bondage to another.

Counselors and proponents of this type of evangelism give glowing reports and testimonies where their prescriptions work. Yet for every one that does apparently achieve its desired result, one can be produced that did not.

I probably do as much or more personal counseling than the next preacher, but it has been my experience that when persons come with a “happiness” problem, they get no help from the gospel. If their main concern is a better marriage, better family relations, better financial situation, better social conditions, then they are going to be sorely disappointed with any evangelical truth. The plain truth is that all of that must sink into oblivion, to become the least important things, and one’s relationship to God become the one issue. Christ did not die to make men happy, but holy. If a person has a *sin* problem, then the gospel has a message for him.

Please do not suppose that I am attacking the practice of psychology. It has its place. Nor am I implying that we do not have psychologists who are Christians. But I would hope they would pursue their professions as psychologists, not as a “Christian psychologist.” All men including Christians have a psychological aspect. They have mind and emotion. But the gospel of salvation

and sanctification with which we have to do is purely spiritual. It involves the mind and emotions, but these are always subject to the spirit. Therefore, the psychologist is *no more* qualified to minister the gospel through the devices and ploys learned in his training than the dirt farmer who never opened a psychology book, but who knows the gospel of Jesus Christ the Lord.

As for the family emphasis in evangelism, one must search the scriptures vainly to find either precept, precedent or principle for it. The gospel is by its very nature addressed to individuals. “The *soul* that sinneth, *it* shall die.” “*He* that believeth on the son hath eternal life.” We come to Christ alone; we can neither bring others with us or blame others for our failure to come. The idea that believers cannot persevere without the cooperation of their families and loved ones is as false and black as any lie that ever came out of hell. Have we forgotten, or simply ignored Christ’s words: “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.” How would that fit into a Family Life Seminar where proverbs and principles are preached assuring a happy, harmonious Christian family?

There is no such thing as Christianity without a deep, heartfelt longing for the salvation of loved ones. The Bible does certainly give principles for the Christian household. But we lie, and set people up for disastrous disillusion by leading them to believe that the Bible promises happiness and tranquility at home.

Tozer succinctly points out how far this type of approach misses the mark: “The philosophy back of this kind of thing may be sincere, but its sincerity does not save it from being false. It is false because it is blind. It misses completely the whole meaning of the cross.

The cross is a symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of a human being. The man in Roman times who took up his cross and started down the road had already said good-bye to his friends. He was not coming back. He was not going out to have his life redirected; he was going out to have it ended. The cross made no compromise, modified nothing, spared nothing; it slew all the man, completely and for good. It did not try to keep on good terms with its victim. It struck cruel and hard, and when it had finished its work, the man was no more.

But the really treacherous trap about “happiness” and “full life” evangelism is the unspoken, subtle but certain implication that perhaps there isn’t any life after this one. Life is related completely to the here and now. The idea of a heaven or a hell is a possibility, but by no means certain, and one should be careful not to put too many eggs in that basket. After all, a bird in hand is better than two in a bush. Any happiness or fulfillment that Christ spoke of must be realized now. Correspondingly, and hell or suffering, punishment or whatever, must be related to the inconveniences and frustrations of this present life.

This is clearly indicated in the little book to which I referred in the second paragraph of this article. Its author is Robert Brinsmead, editor of Verdict, a disfellowshipped Seventh Day Adventist, and apparently, still an annihilationist. His concept of life must be related to this present one, since there is no eternal hell in his theology. To him the hell of the Bible is alienation. That is the meaning of the abyss, so he makes clear in chapter six: the terrible separation from being rightly related to the environment, to others and to ourselves, is the only hell he envisions, and therefore his gospel goes no further than an attempt to set that right. The only time the word “hell” is permitted in the book is when he is describing the suffering of Christ on the Cross as the “terrors of hell” (which are, according to him) . . . desperate loneliness and God-forsakenness. As terrible as loneliness and alienation from self, man and God may be in this present life, they cannot be made the sole object of Christ’s redemption. They simply become another variation of “happiness” Christianity which denies the true nature of eternal salvation.

I have not intended to paint a dark and gloomy picture of Christianity. There are certainly no personal ground for me to do so. I have received nothing but good from my Saviour’s merciful Hand. The light afflictions and privations that have come my way have served to do naught but to prove His faithfulness and His boundless power to deliver and save. I know little of family alienation and nothing of persecution by my loved ones. The grace of God has abounded mightily toward my family. God has now given me over 51 years of near perfect health.

But, O my dear friend! When I come to preach the gospel of God’s glorious redemption in Christ Jesus to you, these things sink to less than nothing. They fit more properly on Paul’s dunghill than in Christ’s crown. A hundred million wicked hell-bound sinners have more of these carnal delights than I; and ten thousand saints whose shoe-strings I am not worthy to tie, have none of them. No, I must not waste your time trying to make you more happy in your journey. I must prepare you for your destination. We travel briefly, but eternity is forever. You must be prepared to face your Maker. He is holy and you are sinful. Except you find mercy through God’s appointed Saviour, all you enjoy of this life will be forgotten in just one moment of eternal flames. Truly, whoever seeks to save his life (in this world) will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Christ’s sake shall find it.

- C. M.