

Much of What We Thought We Knew Is Wrong

"I CAN'T LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE!" Gene seemed passionate, almost angry, when he made this statement to me one day.

"What is the Christian life?" I asked him.

"You know what the Christian life is, Steve," he answered with mild irritation. "It is doing what Jesus would do in every situation. It's having Him as number one in my life. But there's no way that I can understand how to make that happen, considering what it's like to work in my company. And we won't even talk about my marriage. I ask myself every day how He can be number one in a relationship where two people hardly seem to even notice each other anymore. I don't know what He would do if He were married to my wife! I honestly pray every day, but nothing changes."

As I continued to talk with Gene, it became apparent that he had the same problem that many other people have. He was convinced that he had accurately diagnosed his problem and that he knew the correct answer. He sincerely believed that his assessment of the situation was based on absolute, unquestionable truth. He needed to "do what Jesus would do" in every situation and "have Him as number one" in his life. I decided to go ahead and intentionally say something that I knew would shock him so I could get his attention.

"Gene, I want to propose an idea to you that you might think is radical, but that I believe is biblical."

"What's that?" he said.

"You've been trying to make Jesus number one in your life, right?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Well, I don't believe He *wants* to be number one in your life. In fact, I think your attempts to make Him number one by doing what He would do are a big part of what's causing your problems."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, uncertain of where I was going.

I continued, "What if much of what you've learned about living as a Christian is wrong? What if there is a way of life for the Christian that is different than anything you've known?" I could tell by his expression he was skeptical and defensive, yet curious.

You've Never Known Life Like This

Israel was about to be led into a new life, one that would be completely different from anything they had ever known. Joshua gave the orders to his officers and they conveyed them to the people: "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God with the Levitical priests carrying it, then you shall set out from your place to go after it" (Joshua 3:3). Then he told them plainly, "You have not passed this way before" (3:4).

You have not passed this way before. This is one of the great understatements of the Bible. God's people were about to enter a dimension of living so unlike anything they had ever known that they couldn't even imagine what the new world would be like. So it is with the Christian today who moves from the wilderness of religious legalism into the land of grace. To live there is to experience the reality of who we are in Christ. To compare the differ-

ence between living a religious lifestyle and experiencing a grace walk is to compare two dimensions of living that are more diametrically opposed than a person can conceive until he has crossed over from one to the other.

In 1990 the Lord began to teach me my identity in Christ and since then I have lived in a different world.¹ The new world of grace causes wilderness living to pale to rubbish by comparison. Max, a photographer, described his own experience well when he told me, "Before I knew my identity in Christ, my life was like a 3 x 5 black-and-white still photograph, but when I came to understand what it means to experience Him living through me, my life became like a full-length motion picture with all the special effects!"

Consider the questions I posed to Gene in response to his effort to make Jesus number one in his life. What if much of what *you* have learned about living as a Christian is wrong? What if there is a way of life for the Christian that is different than anything you've known?

Just Because We Haven't Heard It Doesn't Mean It Isn't True

I believe two things are very important as we travel together through this journey. First, it is important not to be gullible. It is a sad fact that there is much false teaching in our day that attempts to pass as spiritual truth. As Christians we have a responsibility to measure what we hear by the Bible before we assimilate it into our belief system. Paul said of the Berean Christians, "Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, *examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so*" (Acts 17:11, emphasis added). It is important to determine

whether or not concepts that are new to us can stand up to the scrutiny of God's Word.

Yet there is another side to this coin, especially when it comes to the matter of grace in the lives of Christians. This is the side of the issue that has paralyzed many believers, keeping them from moving forward in spiritual growth. It concerns our willingness to accept biblical truth that may be new to us. Having acknowledged the importance of not being gullible, look to the other side of the coin and consider this question: *Are you teachable?* Just because a truth may be new to you doesn't mean that it is a new truth. No truth is really new, only newly realized.

*What if there is a way of life
for the Christian that is different than
anything you've known?*

Many Christians have systematized their spiritual beliefs into orderly compartments that they feel are neatly arranged and easily managed. Anytime they hear something that is new to them, they attempt to fit it into one of those self-designed compartments. If it won't fit, they reject the new concept without giving it any further consideration.

This fact presents a real problem when it comes to the matter of moving people from the wilderness of religion into God's grace-land. Why? Because there is no place where legalistic religion and grace can intersect. Law and grace can never coexist together; consequently, a Christian whose lifestyle is primarily

religious in essence may have great difficulty crossing over into the new land. One must move *out* of the wilderness in order to move *into* Canaan. To accept grace means to renounce legalism—a system of living in which we try to make spiritual progress or gain God’s blessings based on what we do. That kind of paradigm shift can sometimes come with great resistance after one has lived in the wilderness for a long time.

Whenever someone attempts to introduce a radically different insight to people whose minds have been formed by an old and well-worked-out way of thinking, he or she is up against an obstacle. Jesus said their taste for the old wine is so well established that they invariably prefer it to the new. More than that, the new wine, still fermenting, seems to them so obviously and dangerously full of power that they will not even consider putting it into their old and fragile wineskins. But now try to see the point of the biblical imagery of wine-making a little more abstractly. The new insight is always at odds with the old way of looking at things. Even if the teacher’s audience were to try earnestly to take it in, the only intellectual devices they would have to pick it up with are the categories of the old system with which it conflicts. Hence the teacher’s problem: if he leaves in his teaching a single significant scrap of the old system, they, by their very effort to understand, will go to that scrap rather than to the point he is making and, having done that, will understand the new only insofar as it can be made to agree with the old—which is, not at all.²

Robert Capon pinpoints the problem, saying, “We grant you that the theology of grace has suffered gross neglect—that we have reached a point at which almost all people, inside the

church as well as outside, find that the notion of grace stands in contradiction to everything they understand by religion.”³

Genuine Truth Is Grounded in God’s Reality

Having been born into a world system in which every religion known to man stresses his responsibility to stay in favor with his god through specifically defined behavior, it requires a radical paradigm shift for most Christians to move into a mind-set that embraces the idea that our behavior has absolutely nothing to do with gaining or *staying in* God’s favor. To suggest that there is nothing the believer can do that would put him out of favor with God sounds almost blasphemous to the religious mind. Most of us who grew up in church *know better* than that, don’t we? Therein lies the problem. Often as much must be *unlearned* as is learned about walking in grace as a believer. Theologian Krister Stendahl astutely observed that “it is not so much what we don’t know, but what we think we know that obstructs our vision.”⁴

One significant barrier that prevents many people in the modern church from enjoying a life in grace is what they *think* they know. They are firmly entrenched in a paradigm of spiritual reality that to them is self-evident, however imaginary it may actually be. Without divine intervention, the religionist will never experience grace to its fullest extent. Recipients of grace must have a heart and mind that are open toward God, and nothing so decidedly shuts down one’s capacity to receive as empty religion.

Let’s go back to my conversation with Gene. His belief that Christ should be number one in his life is more than truth to him. His idea that he should attempt to do what Jesus would do in any given situation is a spiritual *reality* to him. While one’s viewpoint on truth may be examined, or even questioned, *reality*

is never questioned because nobody ever even considers that it *can* be questioned. On his own, Gene would never consider that his opinion might be out of line with reality. His viewpoint is a *self-evident* truth to him—a reality.

Gene is experiencing what Charles Kraft calls “subjective reality.” Kraft contends that there is both an objective REALITY and a subjective reality. We look at an eternal REALITY and take a kind of photograph of it with our minds. Then we operate on the basis of that mental picture. Thus the REALITY “out there” is mediated to our minds through a mental picture that we ourselves construct.⁵

Is Our Reality Also God’s Reality?

Many believers think they understand the truth about grace yet have never even begun to comprehend the REALITY of its beauty in full bloom. Would you be willing to consider for a moment that some of the ideas about the Christian life that you have held as truth may not be grounded in REALITY? As we move forward in a growing understanding of God’s grace, we will begin to see that the grace of God is so much bigger and better than we had imagined.

To gain an expanded understanding and appreciation of the grace of God, we must be willing to admit that we may not have everything correctly sorted out in our belief system at the present moment. An unwillingness to have our mind changed will imprison us in the wilderness; it will keep us from fully enjoying all that God so longs for us to have.

I heard a story about a man who was fishing one day when another man sat down a few feet away and watched him. He noticed that, contrary to what fishermen usually do, the man

would keep the small fish and throw the big ones back into the water. Finally, the observer's curiosity got the better of him.

"Sir, I can't help but wonder: Why are you throwing back the *big* fish?"

"Because my frying pan is not big enough to cook them," the fisherman answered.

That's what has happened to many in the modern church: Their "frying pan" is simply too small to contain the larger truths of God's grace. As Charles Kraft points out:

While we have seen the "big R" REALITY, we perceive it as "small r" reality. Our perception is always subjective, focused, limited, and partial. Though we cannot understand absolutely, we need to learn as much as possible about REALITY and to adjust our perception of reality accordingly. To do this we must learn to be open to understandings that lie beyond those we now have. We need to keep searching for new insights in REALITY and adjusting our perceptions to those new insights. This involves constant comparison between our present views and those we become aware of through other people and new experiences, including books.⁶

These adjustments in our beliefs must be governed by the Bible and not by any religious indoctrination we may have received. It is important to recognize that the two are not always synonymous. Don't confuse the "small r" religious teaching that you may have received with the "big R" REALITY of the Word of God. While the Bible is totally trustworthy, anything we may have been taught is fair game for critical scrutiny, which ultimately may lead us to reject the teaching in question if it doesn't align with the Bible.

In a lively discussion among friends, one man was asked, "What do *you* believe?"

"I believe what my church believes," he responded.

"What does your church believe?" he was asked.

"My church believes what I believe," he calmly responded.

"Well, what do you *both* believe?" he was challenged.

Without hesitation, the man answered, "We both believe the same thing."

Such blindness caused by religion will be a lifelong malady unless the Great Physician intervenes.

Recipients of grace must have a heart and mind open toward God, and nothing so decidedly shuts down one's capacity to receive as empty religion.

An essential element in whether or not one will be able to experience the joys of living in God's new land rests in how open he is to growing in grace. People like Gene are so mired in the muck of religious misinformation that they must have divine intervention if their minds, and consequently their lives, are to ever be rescued by the unconditional, limitless grace of God. I have skirted all around the question that must be answered. Now I put it to you bluntly: Are you willing to have your mind changed about some of the things you have always believed?

I was discussing a theological issue with a friend one day and said to him, "I just finished reading a book on this subject that blew my mind. I became so frustrated at some points of the book that I wanted to put it down without finishing it."

"Why?" my friend asked. "Was it because the author's arguments suggested that you have been wrong in what you have believed about the subject?"

"No," I answered. "It's worse than that. He *proved* it!"

It's never comfortable to have our doctrinal idols destroyed. The degree of difficulty in having our opinion on a subject changed is in direct proportion to how intricately embedded the belief is in our minds and lives. Some people don't want to be confused with the truth, but to move into grace-land it is necessary to leave on this side of the Jordan River those worn-out religious folk tales which, until now, we have always cherished as sound doctrine.

Christ Doesn't Want to Be Number One in Your Life

I have chosen two popular religious untruths to illustrate how vehemently one may hold to his perception of reality, despite its underlying fantasy. First, consider Gene's belief that he must make Jesus number one in his life. His goal sounds admirable, and at first glance biblically sound, but there is a subtle danger in his perspective. It presupposes that Christ *wants* to be number one in our lives. Why would that perspective present a subtle danger? Allow me to answer that question with a question that I hope makes the answer obvious.

If Jesus Christ wants to be number one in your life, who holds second place? For the Christian there is no number two. Jesus Christ will not be denigrated by being on anybody's list. He *is* the whole list because He is our whole Life. For the Christian there is no life apart from Jesus. For us to live *is* Christ (see Acts 17:28; Philippians 1:21; Colossians 3:4). Jesus didn't come to take a place in our lives, even first place. He came to become our Life. He

is number one, number two, and number three. He's the whole list, the source of everything.

Every new Christian understands the all-pervasive place of Christ. Nobody has to tell him that Jesus is to be number one in his family, on his job, or in his leisure life. Nothing of the sort would even occur to him. Christ as number one? His understanding is that Christ is *everything*. The newly born Christian is consumed with Jesus Christ. Then at some point he is ambushed by religion, with all its rules about how to make Jesus be number one, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Andrew Murray comments:

When first the believer finds Christ as his righteousness, he has such joy in the new-made discovery that the study of holiness hardly has a place. But as he grows, the desire for holiness makes itself felt, and he seeks to know what provision his God has made for supplying that need. A superficial acquaintance with God's plan leads to the view that while justification is God's work, by faith in Christ, sanctification is our work, to be performed under the influence of the gratitude we feel for the deliverance we have experienced, and by the aid of the Holy Spirit. Often the believer struggles hopelessly for years, until he listens to the teaching of the Spirit, as He glorifies Christ again, and reveals Christ, our sanctification, to be appropriated by faith alone.⁷

Our flesh so wants to *do something* to contribute to our holiness. When Gene was told plainly that he didn't need to try to make Christ number one in his life, it didn't set well with him. He was at a critical juncture in his Christian walk at this point. He could embrace the truth that Jesus Christ *is* his life, rest in that truth, and thus be liberated from the tyranny of trying to make

Him be what He in REALITY already is. Or he could clench his religious fist around his “small r” reality that he must try to make Jesus be number one and stumble away into the darkness of legalistic demands that will forever refuse to be satisfied.

Have you chosen a rest or a list? Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The invitation is to leave the wilderness of religion and come on over to the land of God’s grace, where you don’t have to struggle anymore. When Jesus ascended back to the right hand of the Father, He sat down for a reason. The job has been done. Believers have been justified, sanctified, and glorified (see Romans 8:29). There’s nothing left for us to do except believe it, relax, and enjoy the journey. If there were anything left to do to put God and the Christian in a right standing with each other, Jesus would have done it. The fact is that He *did* do it—all of it.

*Jesus didn't come to take a place in our lives,
even first place. He came to be our Life.*

After writing seven chapters championing the complete sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross, the writer of Hebrews says, “Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Hebrews 8:1). The struggle for our holiness is over and Jesus has sat down to prove it. Gene had always believed that he must work hard to make Christ first in his life. He was wrong. Christ *is* his life. Have you been wrong about that too?

The Belief That We Must Do What Jesus Would Do Is Wrong

Gene also believed that he was supposed to do what Jesus would do in every situation, another fallacy that has found renewed popularity in our day. Charles Sheldon's classic work, *In His Steps*, and the acclaimed work of Thomas à Kempis, *Of the Imitation of Christ*, have both fostered the idea that the Christian's behavior should be rooted in the question "What would Jesus do?" While there is good in both of these books, it is unfortunate that they encourage a lifestyle of imitation.

There is no way that a believer can successfully imitate the life of Jesus Christ. Even a cursory reading of the New Testament reveals a holiness of life that is absolutely beyond our reach, barring a miracle of epic proportions. Consider this short list of a few basic things the Bible says Christians are to do if we are to be like Jesus:⁸

- We are to walk as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6).
- We are to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44).
- We are to forgive as Jesus forgave (Colossians 3:13).
- We are to be kind to those who hate us and even pray for them (Matthew 5:44).
- We are to consistently be overcomers—more than conquerors (Romans 8:37).
- We are to give thanks in every situation of life (Ephesians 5:20).
- We are to never worry about anything, but always have peace (Philippians 4:6).
- We are to rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4).
- We are to be holy (1 Peter 1:16).
- We are to stand out in bold contrast to this wicked world (Philippians 2:15).

- We are to hate ourselves and renounce our selfish desires daily (Matthew 16:24).
- We are to keep our focus on heavenly things (Colossians 3:1).

Have you had enough yet? These are only a dozen ways that we are to be like Christ. He did every one of these things constantly and perfectly. How have you done with these twelve? Can you consistently do ten out of twelve? Six of the twelve? Even one of the twelve? If we aren't perfectly and consistently doing them all, it's a pathetic joke to think that we can imitate the life of Jesus Christ. Even if you could perfect these twelve, I must inform you there are hundreds more where these came from. Don't think that all God expects is your best effort either, because the Bible makes it very clear that God doesn't grade on the curve.

The belief that the Christian life is an imitation of the life of Christ is *wrong*. Any Christian would tell an unbeliever that he can't become a Christian by looking to Jesus as a model of behavior. Every Christian knows that salvation requires that one receive the life of Christ by faith. Why then do so many people, having become Christians, now think that the life of Jesus becomes a model for them to imitate? Jesus Christ has placed His life into us so that He can live His life through us. It has nothing to do with imitation but everything to do with participation. "For we have become *partakers* of Christ" (Hebrews 3:14, emphasis added).

Leaving Our Wrong Theology in the Wilderness

I spent the first 29 years of my Christian life committed to some beliefs that I sincerely thought were truth but eventually came to see were wrong. I don't need to make Jesus Christ number one in my life. He *is* my Life! I don't have to ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" He lives inside me and will

express His life *through* me if I'll only trust Him to do it. The WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets and bumper stickers that are so popular today point in the wrong direction. One friend said that the letters should represent "Watch What Jesus Does!" As believers, we have the Spirit of Jesus Christ dwelling within us (see 1 Corinthians 3:16). As we trust Him, we participate in the expression of His divine life through us. To attempt to imitate Him is a cheap substitute for authentic Christian living.

As the Israelites prepared to cross over the Jordan River into Canaan, Joshua's words may have echoed in their heads: "You have not passed this way before." Leaving behind the wilderness of religion brings much more than subtle cultural differences. It is REALITY because God's grace-land is His hometown. It is moving into a land where much of what we knew to be true before has no significance anymore. It's the start of a new life with a new identity, a place where everything we have been and known before is *cut away* in a way that is astounding.



Dear Father,

I realize how presumptuous I have been at times in thinking that I have the "right" understanding of everything I believe. I don't want to be gullible, but I do want to be teachable. Please enable me to receive truth from You that may be new to me. Keep me from rejecting an idea just because I haven't seen it that way before. Enable me to examine what I read in the light of Your Word to see if it's true. If it is, then grant me the humility to have my mind changed.

G.R.A.C.E. Group Questions

1. Name one area of your beliefs where you have experienced a radical change from what you used to believe.
2. Read Acts 17:11. What should be the response of the Christian when confronted with ideas that are new to him?
3. This chapter suggests that Jesus Christ doesn't want to be number one in your life. Discuss both sides of this statement, giving the pros and cons of each side. What do you believe? Why?
4. List three problems with asking ourselves the question "What would Jesus do?" What would be a better question for the Christian to ask? What is the difference between imitating the life of Christ and participating in His life?
5. What are some obstacles that prevent people from changing their opinion about something they have long believed?