

CHRIST THE SUM OF DIVINE THINGS, Watchman Nee

A serious trouble with present-day Christianity is its complexity: it comprises so many things. Many people conceive of it as a multitude of Christians possessing a multitude of Christ-like qualities; this one has such love, that one such patience, the other such humility. How we covet these virtues! So we set out in quest of them.

But it was never God's intention that we should become possessors of a variety of gifts and graces; He intended us to enter into our heritage in His Son. It is a Person He presents to us, not a lot of spiritual things; and it is failure to apprehend this fact that accounts for so much breakdown in the lives of His children.

When non-Christians become aware that they are sinners and have learned that those are the kind of people Christ saves, they come to Him for salvation and enter into an experience of His saving grace; but they discover sooner or later that this experience does not meet all their need; so they come with a further request and have a further experience. With each fresh consciousness of need they ask for something fresh to add to their store of spiritual things. Today they pray for this thing, tomorrow for that thing, and the next day for something else. The things prayed for keep increasing; but even if the things received keep pace with the things requested, they never fully meet the need.

In the purpose of God, Christ is not only the Giver of everything we need; He is everything we need. It is a recognition of this that produces vital Christianity in contrast to Christianity as it is commonly conceived with its stress on externalities. Let us turn to God's Word for our instruction.

JOHN'S TESTIMONY

In his Gospel, John records that Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Let us look into this astounding assertion.

CHRIST IS THE WAY

In the simplest of terms the Lord states that God's way for man is not something that can be charted on a map; indeed it is not a thing at all; His Son is His only means of attaining His end. "I am the way," says Jesus, and He adds: "no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." The one and only way that leads from where we are to where God is is Christ. All who have truly come to God have at least on one occasion experienced that Christ does not merely teach us the way to the Father; He is the Way. But after our first coming to God through Christ we need to realize that progressively, as initially, our only approach to the Father is through the Son. "I am the Way" was true when we first come to God; it is still true and always will be.

Yet numbers of defeated Christians have for years been seeking the way of victory and they are still pursuing their weary quest. Alas! they are searching for a way and are missing Him Who is THE WAY. As long as we are trying to discover some method of overcoming we are doomed to defeat.

Let us consider the case of two Christians. One, being finally persuaded of his inability to overcome, trusts the Lord to do in him what he cannot do for himself, and something vital transpires in his life. Another, hearing his testimony, goes through the same motions; but nothing happens. How do you account for the difference in the experience of these two Christians? The first made contact with Christ Himself and learned to rely on Him for everything; the second noted the formula and set to work on the basis of it. Formulas have their use in the natural realm, but in the spiritual realm nothing has value apart from Christ.

Occasionally we hear perplexed Christians pass remarks such as this: "I read the Word, I lay hold of the promises, I pray; but it doesn't work." Why doesn't it work? Because they are the workers. They have watched the process in other lives and have tried to copy it. They have studied the externalities of Christianity and are seeking to reproduce them instead of letting Christ reproduce Himself in them.

In a certain place someone was preaching on Romans 6-8. One of the audience approached him at the close of the meeting and said: "Now I understand the way of victory; I've discovered the secret." Presently another member of the audience quietly bowed and was about to pass out of the hall when the preacher stopped him and asked: "Well, what about it?" That brother replied: "I dare to believe the Lord has opened my eyes and given me a new glimpse of Himself, but I have really nothing to say." The self-confident brother who fancied he had found a way out of his past failures continued to live a life of defeat, whereas the very diffident brother who had not found any new way, had seen Christ to be THE WAY, and the result was a changed life.

CHRIST IS THE TRUTH

Many Christians conceive of the Truth as being the doctrine concerning Christ; but according to our Lord's own statement, the Truth is not a matter of doctrines concerning Him; it IS Himself. John quotes Christ as having said: "I am ... the truth," Could anything be clearer than that? And John records this other statement made by our Lord concerning the Truth: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Just stop for a moment and think. How much of the teaching about Christ that you know so well has had the effect of liberating you? Alas! we are familiar with the teaching about Christ, but we are not sufficiently familiar with Christ Himself. No truth as a thing has the power to liberate men; but He who IS the Truth liberates all who make actual contact with Him. It is possible for us to listen to Christian truths for years on end, and even to preach about them, and still be bound by much that is not of Christ. The trouble is, we have been occupying ourselves with TRUTHS, not with THE TRUTH. THE TRUTH always liberates. We may be able to expound the doctrine of our crucifixion with Christ while the reality of our crucifixion with Him is not evident in our daily conduct. We may be eloquent exponents of our resurrection with Him and yet not live in the good of His resurrection. We have laid hold of many TRUTHS, but, alas! we do not know Christ as the sum of TRUTH. Let us test our experience by His word: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

CHRIST IS THE LIFE

We need to differentiate clearly between life and actions. Life is bound to express itself in actions, but actions are no substitute for life. Many Christians put forth a tremendous amount of effort in their desire to be Christ-like; but the life of Christ is always spontaneous. Even natural life functions spontaneously. How do your eyes see? How do your ears hear? You do not consciously exert effort all the time trying to see and trying to hear; you just open your eyes and they see; you just open your ears and they hear. Excessive effort indicates sickness. The movements of a healthy body are spontaneous and often unconscious.

CHRIST IS THE RESURRECTION

"Jesus said ... I am the resurrection" (John 11:25). These words were spoken prior to the raising of Lazarus, and Christ was not merely claiming the ability to bring a dead man to life, though He did in fact perform an act of resurrection on this occasion and on various other occasions too. The stress here is not an what He DOES, but on what He IS. "I am the resurrection."

What is resurrection? Resurrection is something that has gone into death and has emerged in life. Resurrection presupposes death. There can be no resurrection where there has been no death. God said that the day Adam ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that day he would surely die. He ate the forbidden fruit; and it came to pass as God had said: death immediately set in. Adam had not that in him

which could overcome death; and so it is with every one of Adam's race; not one can survive the test of death. But listen to the declaration of Christ! "I am the first and the last, and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18). This One – the Last Adam -- went into death, but death could not hold him. He IS the Resurrection! He has overcome death and in resurrection glory bears the marks of His conflict with the enemy. The wound-prints are still there. Alas! His followers so seldom bear the marks of death; that is why there is so little evidence of resurrection life. Resurrection is inseparably related to the Cross.

CHRIST IS THE BREAD OF LIFE

"I am the bread of life" says Christ (John 6:48). What does this further claim imply? What is bread? Bread is that which satisfies hunger. While I am hungry I lack the energy to work, but when I have eaten I am strengthened and can face the task. Many Christians lack the strength to serve Christ because they have never found their satisfaction in Him. They work quite well for a year or two but gradually come to a halt. They feel dry and empty and hope for the opportunity to attend a spiritual retreat so that they may replenish their depleted store. Periodic spiritual retreats may provide a temporary stimulus, but they cannot bring ultimate satisfaction. Permanent satisfaction can only come when we discover that Christ is the Bread of life and learn to draw on Him ceaselessly for sustenance. When He was on earth and was hungry and weary He could minister to the need of the woman of Samaria and could find His own need met even as He spent Himself on her behalf. When his disciples offered Him food, to their amazement He declined; but He explained the secret source of His perennial satisfaction: "I have meat to eat that ye know not of ... My meat is to do the will of him that sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:32-34).

CHRIST IS THE LIGHT OF LIFE

Again and again John quotes our Lord's claim to be in Himself all that man needs. John 8:12 reads: "Jesus spake unto them saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Christ is not only the Giver of light; He IS the Light. He is the Light of the world, and those who maintain a close relationship with Him have more than mere external light; they have the Light of life. Spiritual light is not a matter of intellectual knowledge; so it frequently happens that those who see much in the spiritual realm can tell little of what they see, in contrast to those who have little spiritual vision but are always ready to talk about the wonderful light they have received from the Lord. The effect of divine light is never to build up those who receive it. It does not build up; it lays low; it is devastating to human nature. "Knowledge puffeth up"; it cannot put man out of action, for man can serve himself of it for his own up building. So-called light on the Scriptures may add considerably to our standing in the Christian world; but the Light of life adds nothing to our prestige. However, it can do what no amount of common light can do; it can incapacitate the natural man by its blinding blaze and thus make a way for God to get His purpose through.

Christ is the I AM

Throughout his Gospel, John keeps emphasizing the fact that whatever thing man may need for his daily life, Christ is that thing; and he records Christ's astounding claim to be the I AM. Here are our Lord's own words: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58). And here again -- "Except ye believe that I am, ye shall die in your sins" (8:24). If there is to be an ultimate solution to our problem, then we must come to know Christ as the I AM.

PAUL'S TESTIMONY

Paul, no less clearly than John, testifies to the fullness of Christ. Listen to what he says to the Ephesians: "... the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in him unto a dispensation of the fullness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the

things upon the earth" (1:9-10). And listen to these words to the Colossians: "In him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fullness dwell; and through him to reconcile all things to himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross; through him I say, whether things upon the earth, or things in the heavens" (1:16-20). And could anything be more conclusive or more crystal-clear than this statement: "Christ is all, and in all" (3:11)?

But have we really seen that Christ is All and in all? God's purpose is that in all things He should have the pre-eminence, and He attains His end by putting all things into Christ and putting us also into Him. This Paul explains very clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1:30). Do you get the significance of this verse? Paul is not saying that God is prepared to bestow certain gifts upon us -- the gift of wisdom; the gift of righteousness; the gift of sanctification; the gift of redemption. No. he is saying that Christ IS our wisdom; Christ IS our righteousness; Christ IS our sanctification; Christ IS our redemption. It has pleased God to sum up all things in Christ, and having put all things into Him, God has nothing to give us apart from Him. It is not a fuller supply of God's gifts we need; it is a fuller knowledge of the One Who IS His all-inclusive Gift.

BREAKING DOWN AND BUILDING UP

As we go on in the Christian life we are liable to make a surprising discovery. We find that the commendable qualities that marked our early days have gradually vanished and certain unattractive features are manifesting themselves. When I was a young Christian I was commended by various people for the Christ-likeness of my life, but some years later I found to my consternation that my temper was often getting the better of me. Even when I managed to control it so that it did not actually flare up, it was seething inside; and to add to my distress and disillusionment, those kindly Christians who had commended me for the Christ-like qualities that formerly impressed them, were not slow to tell me how unfavorably my present life compared with my past. I used to be so humble and so patient, they said, so gentle and loving ... but now ...! The worst of it was, their criticisms were not unfounded. I could have outdone them with my own tales of failure for they seemed to be legion. But how had this tragic state of affairs developed? What was the trouble? The trouble was that I had been accumulating things, spiritual things, and God had taken in hand to relieve me of them to make way for the life of His Son.

Brothers and Sisters, if God is to do a permanent building-up work in our lives, then He must first do a breaking-down work, for we have a natural propensity for acquiring things, and things as such have no place in His purpose for His people. Oh, how we have sought over the years to refrain from sinful things and to cultivate spiritual things! How we have taken ourselves to task for those wretched uprisings of pride, and how earnestly we have sought to emulate the humility of Christ! How we have striven to acquire meekness and love and a host of other praiseworthy things! But through repeated disillusionment God has been able at length to convince us that our highly prized acquisitions lacked the eternal quality that is in Christ; they could now even stand the stresses and strains of a short life-time.

Before we were converted we had begun to amass worldly things and these, of course, had to go when we came to Christ; but the old natural acquisitiveness had been carried over into the spiritual realm and by degrees we had accumulated lots of spiritual things; so, when we reached a certain stage in our Christian history God began to remove them. When those things that bolstered us up were gone, we began to learn what it means to lean on the Lord and to live by Him alone; nevertheless, because of the inveterate tendency to add to our possessions, the breaking-down as well as the building-up process continues for the rest of our days.

Pardon my frankness if I say that as I scan this gathered company I see many of your lives cluttered with things – the same things that cluttered them years ago. I admit that some of you have patience, amazing patience; and conscientiousness some of you have in no small measure; and loving-kindness you have too, and lots of other virtues. Where else could I go to find all these precious things? But the one thing God is jealously looking for in your lives is not so easily found. He is not looking for what you possess in yourselves, nor is He looking for what you can do in yourselves; He is looking for His Christ.

May I refer to an up-to-date personal experience by way of further illustration? A few days ago I learned that a brother had met some domestic difficulty and my spontaneous reaction was to go and visit him. As a fellow-Christian, and one in a position of responsibility, surely the least I could do was to call on him and express my sympathy and bring what practical relief I could. Off I set, therefore, in the direction of his home; but before long I felt strangely fatigued. What was there to tire me? Nothing that I could account for. But gradually it broke upon me that my life was being sapped because God had left me to my own resources. It was I who had been the originator of this noble idea, therefore it was I who must carry it out. While I was seeking to be the kind brother that Christianity required me to be, God withheld His support, for He was not seeking a display of my Christ-likeness, but a manifestation of His Christ.

Ultimately, our one need is to know God's Son. When we truly see Him as the sum of divine things, then we shall react against all that hinders the flow of His life. We shall react whenever we meet the things of God that have become detached from their Source and are being held as personal possessions. When we realize how God reacts against everything that is offered Him as a substitute for His Son, we shall come to hate "dead works" even as He hates them and shall spontaneously recoil from them.

That Christ is the sum of divine things is not a matter for our future discovery; it is a fact for our present acceptance. An unequivocal recognition of this fact will bring our lives into the tide of eternal purpose.