

Modified Improvements

by F. T. Wright, from *The Messenger and News Review*, May 1975

The Bible study was over. The guests to the meeting were standing in loose little groups here and there discussing the theme presented as well as other related and unrelated topics.

Close by me was a brother who possessed a very real experience in the power of the message and an equally real enthusiasm for it. He was in close conversation with one of the folk who had attended, to whom he said very earnestly,

*“We are not people with new beliefs,
new thoughts and new attitudes only.
We are new people.”*

Now he had said nothing new so far as the preaching of this message is concerned, yet, that night, his words struck me with a new impact. In just a few words he had stated the difference between the message and the counterfeit of it. In the following days these thoughts worked in my mind, opening up fresh understandings of the truth as it is in Jesus. With renewed interest and deepened insight, I reread the following words:

The Desire of Ages, p. 172:

Jesus continued: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” By nature the heart is evil, and “who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one.” Job 14:4. No human invention can find a remedy for the sinning soul.

“The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.” Romans 8:7; Matthew 15:19. The fountain of the heart must be purified before the streams can become pure.

He who is trying to reach heaven by his own works in keeping the law is attempting an impossibility. There is no

safety for one who has merely a legal religion, a form of godliness. The Christian's life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a transformation of nature. There is a death to self and sin, and a new life altogether. This change can be brought about only by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit.

The focal point in this paragraph in respect to the line of thought which was now developing was this sentence.

“The Christian's life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a transformation of nature.”

Consider very carefully what the sentence is saying in the light of what it might have said. We are given a declaration here of what the Christian's life is not, before there is given the declaration of what it is.

The statement could have said, the Christian's life is not that of the liar, the thief, the adulterer, the murderer or the drunkard. But the statement does not say this. Does this mean then that this truth is denied and that the liar, the thief and so on, can now regard themselves as being Christians? It is certain that no one would draw this conclusion.

There is a very simple reason as to why this is not stated, and it is that there is no need to tell anyone that such lives are not Christian lives. Everyone who has any knowledge of the Scriptures knows that this is so.

But, what is not so well known and understood is that there is another kind of life, which passes for the life of the Christian, which is not the life of a Christian either. That life is the modified improvement of the old. The statement before us clearly declares this.

“The Christian's life is not a modification or improvement of the old...”

As has been observed above, there is no need to state the all too obvious. Likewise, there is no need to talk about that which is non-existent. Therefore, the very fact that it is here stated that...

“The Christian's life is not a modification or improvement of the old...”

...is proof enough that there are such things as modified improvements of the old life. What is more, there is the danger that many will accept this kind of life as being the life of the Christian, thus becoming the victims of a fatal delusion.

The better one understands the gospel and has an experience commensurate with that understanding, the better that one will see that there are too many today who do accept the modification and improvement of the old life as being the life of a Christian. Therefore, it is very much the time when it should be made quite clear as to what constitutes a modified improvement of the old life versus what the new life is.

The modified improvement of the old will be a life different from that of the man of the world who makes no profession at all. Not only is it different from this, but it is also better than the life of the worldling. In fact, the life of the truly modified improvement of the old is so much better that, if everyone in the world were to have this kind of life, there would no longer be any need for criminal police or for prisons. That would certainly be a far better world than we now have.

It would be a world in which there would be no crime, no wars and no drunkenness. But, even though it would be a far better world than it now is, it would still not be a Christian world, for the truth of God is that

“The Christian life is not a modification or improvement of the old...”

To trace the transition from the life of the worldling to that of the modified improvement of the old, let us begin with the life of the worldling. To him comes the saving truth of the third angel's message and, as he hears, reads and studies, very definite convictions begin to form in his mind.

Those convictions firstly are of the truthfulness of the message as it comes from the Word of God. He is convicted that

the Lord is coming and that when He comes, He will bring with Him the rewards for the lives lived here below.

He then becomes convicted of his own guilt and realizes that if he is not forgiven and his way of life changed, then he will be forever lost when Christ returns. As he is gripped by these convictions, a spirit of repentance is given to him by the God of Heaven through the Spirit. This is the spirit of hatred for sin and a longing to be finished with it. With all his powers, in the best way that he knows at this point, he turns away from his former practices and begins a very different life pattern from that which was previously his.

He no longer spends the hours of the Sabbath in personal pursuits such as building his house, going to races, fishing by the river or the sea, playing golf or going to the ball game. Instead, he is a faithful and interested attendant at the church Sabbath by Sabbath.

In fact, he no longer does at all some of the things he did previously. His days of attendance at the theater are ended. He is no longer seen at the race track, the ball game, or the hotel bar. Instead, he is spending his time outside of work hours in visiting with missionary literature, or planning his work as a Church officer, or helping the poor and the needy, or assisting in an evangelistic campaign. At first his former associates miss him, wonder what has happened to him, and finally dismiss him as being no longer one of them at all. He has moved into a new world altogether.

It is indeed a different world. Not only is it different from what it was before but it is considerably better. Extensive modifications and vast improvements have been made. The subject of his thought is different. His beliefs are different. His habits are not the same as they were before. He has new friends and companions in life. His health is improving as he gives up tea, coffee, flesh foods, nicotine and alcohol.

It can now be truly said that he has new ideas, new beliefs, new convictions, new determinations and, at least so far as

outward things are concerned, he has new habits and practices.

At this stage, he has all this without as yet having the new life in the place of the old. All of this is there with the old life still present. The old life itself has been modified and improved.

This, though it passes in the minds of so many as being such, is not the life of the Christian. The Christian, while he certainly does have new ideas, new beliefs, new convictions, new determinations, and new habits and practices, has much more than that as well. He no longer has the old life. He has a new life altogether.

The Foolish Virgins

The life of the foolish virgin is exactly that of the modified improvement of the old.

Christ's Object Lessons, p. 411:

The class represented by the foolish virgins are not hypocrites. They have a regard for the truth, they have advocated the truth, they are attracted to those who believe the truth; but they have not yielded themselves to the Holy Spirit's working. They have not fallen upon the Rock, Christ Jesus, and permitted their old nature to be broken up.

The foolish virgins hear the message of the soon coming of the Bridegroom. They believe it as they are convicted by it. They take their lamps, the Bible, and by its light they join the wise virgins and go forth to meet the Bridegroom. So they have new beliefs, new convictions, new objectives, new hopes, new companions and new habits and practices in their lives. There is a very different way of life for them. They are lives which have been modified and improved, but...

“They have not fallen upon the Rock, Christ Jesus, and permitted their old nature to be broken up.”

Therefore, if they have not fallen upon the Rock, Christ Jesus, and permitted their old nature to be broken up, then they still have the old nature which is the old life. Therefore at this

stage then, any changes or improvements in the life are improvements and modifications of the old life. It is not the manifestation of the presence of the new life. Therefore, they are not Christians.

Every Christian will be saved into the eternity of God. But the foolish virgins, if they remain such, will not find eternal salvation. Instead they will be outside when the door is closed at last.



Yet, without a doubt, they do believe that they will be saved with the rest:

- Do they not believe what the others believe?
- Do they not go forth to meet the Bridegroom as do the others?
- Have they not changed their companions and left behind the pleasures which they originally shared with those companions?
- Having done all this, having seen such a great change in so many things, and such extensive improvements to their way of life, should they not expect to see eternal life?

This may seem to be a very logical conclusion to draw, but nonetheless the Scriptures make it as clear as it can be made that the foolish virgin does not go in to the marriage, but is left forever outside the door.

Three Possibilities

How very much easier it would be if it was that there were but the two kinds of lives in the world today,—the life of the genuine Christian and the life of the worldling. Then it would be much easier to know which side you were on.

But there is this third class. It is the modified improvement of the old life symbolized in the Bible by the Laodicean, the foolish virgin and the stony-ground hearer. These folk look like Christians, they talk like Christians, they believe what the Christian believes at least so far as the doctrine is concerned but they have never come to be partakers of the new life in Christ Jesus. Therefore they look and sound like being Christians without being such.

To every true Christian this can be a very real trial of faith. It is perplexing and troubling. I well remember an occasion when I met a certain man who was to all appearances a very ardent Christian. He loved to read the Word of God and had a very extensive knowledge of the Bible. He was able to quote the verses he needed to establish his point. He talked very long and lovingly of Jesus. His home was neat. He was the model of sweet courtesy and fine hospitality. We had a most pleasant conversation together.

I felt certain that here was a genuine child of God indeed. It was true that he did not observe the right Sabbath day. It was true that he did not subscribe to the great truths of the third angel's message, but then it was most likely that he had never had the opportunity to hear and to receive these truths. But he certainly appeared to have a great love for the Saviour and for the Bible. There was no doubt but that his study of the

Bible had been the great factor in making him to be the man he was.

So it was that I had the confidence to hand to him a copy of *Steps to Christ*. I was sure that he would really appreciate this wonderful book and that it would form the basis of common ground from which we could move together into the great truths of the third angel's message. I told him that I would call by in another week and see how he liked the little book.

It was with a happy heart that I went my way for I was so certain that I had found a genuinely spiritual mind who needed but to hear the saving truths of the third angel's message to accept them. I told the missionary experience to others and they rejoiced with me. With the highest expectations, I returned to see him the following week.

Imagine my disappointment and bewilderment when, with a dark and angry countenance, he almost threw the book at me exclaiming,

“Here take your book. I want never to see it again. The Christ of that book is not my Christ.”

From that point on we found no common ground whatsoever and I have never seen that man from that day to this. I went away from that experience asking myself as to how this could be. I decided for the time being that he must have the counterfeit of true religion as foretold in the Scriptures as being the prevalent thing in the last days.

But it was a puzzle, for here was a man living a better life. It was evident that the study of the Word of God had produced that better life, yet, when he came in contact with one of the finest presentations of the way to Christ in existence, he denounced the Christ of that book as not being the true Christ. Now, it is evident that if he denounced the true Christ, then he cannot himself be a follower of that Christ and, therefore, is not himself a Christian. His life was a modified improvement of the old. He did not have the life of Christ within him.

With and Without the Bible

So far, we have been speaking of that form of modified improvement which is the result of the influence of the Bible, but it is to be seen that, in the human experience there are other idealisms which can produce modified improvements of the old life.

More than once, reference has been made by one person or another who is a Christian, to having met a person who, though he makes no profession of faith in God or the Bible, yet lives a life of high moral standards combined with a gentleness and courtesy which would grace the life of any Christian. The temptation is to think one of two things. First, there is the tendency to think that this person must be a Christian even though he makes no profession of belief in the Word of God.

Then secondly there is the tendency to think that one does not need to be a Christian anyway, for one can live just as good a life without it. In fact, many atheists today argue that they are as good as the people who go to church. They pay an honest dollar; they are courteous and hospitable; they are clean and tidy and provide well for their families. So they do, if they are the kind of atheists who have high ideals to live for, and have disciplined themselves to live up to those high ideals.

Therefore, even though we have been reluctant to admit this in the past, the fact is that the disciplined, idealistic atheist does live every bit as good a life as the average professed Christian. They do this for the simple reason that both of them possess lives which are modified improvements of the old life. It is certain that the atheist does not have the new life of Christ, for he does not even believe in Him. Likewise, the foolish virgin does not have the life of Christ, for he has never allowed religion to take him that far.

In the case of the atheist, some standard has been the goal toward which he has striven. In the case of the religionist, the Bible has set forth that standard. Both have striven with their powers to achieve that profession and both succeed in a very definite way to hammer out of the old life a semblance of true Christianity which passes in the eyes of all too many as being the real thing.

Marvelous indeed is the power of discipline. See the athlete, who deprives himself of all that the average human being regards as life's pleasures so that he might achieve the passing crown of glory. See the musician or the student who applies himself to the cultivation of the highest excellence in his field. See the person who desires to cultivate a certain pleasant kind of personality, succeeding as the result of years of disciplined application.

But none of this is Christianity.

That is something else again.

It is the receiving of a new life in the place of the old so that the manners and graces of Christ spring forth from a heart of the character and quality of the heart of Christ. As you have read through this study, you may have begun to feel that there is no point in even trying to be a Christian for all that you thought certified one as being a Christian is not necessarily the proof at all. The question may well have come strongly into your mind as to how, after all, one can know that one is a Christian.

Rather than be discouraged by this thought, let courage be taken with the assurance that not one of us needs to be merely a modified improvement of the old. We can be new men and women in Christ Jesus. There is not the space in this article to spell out the way in which this may be achieved, and there is no need, as this has been explained at considerable length and detail in other publications. The purpose of this article is to let it be understood that there is a life possibility which is better than the careless irresponsible uncontrolled

life of the man of the world, and yet is not the life of the Christian.

The Real Thing

So far we have been dwelling on what the Christian life is not. Let thought be briefly given to what the Christian life is.

“It is a new life altogether.”

Every one of us is born with that old evil nature, which, while it can be shaped by discipline and control to certain forms and patterns just as a thorn bush can be trimmed into any shape you desire to make it or be trained to grow in a certain way, is nonetheless a fountain of evil and such will ever only be.

To be a Christian, there must come the experience of having that taken away and a new life, even the life of Christ put into its place. Outwardly for the most part there may seem to be no difference between the life of the Christian and the life of the modified improvement. But it is in the time of test that the real differences will be made manifest.

In the life of the modified improvement, there will be strong love for those who love them, and there will be carefully controlled hatred for those who do them harm.

But in the life of the Christian there will be true, genuine, and impartial love for both friends and enemies.

Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, p. 146-7:

When the doctrine we accept kills sin in the heart, purifies the soul from defilement, bears fruit unto holiness, we may know that it is the truth of God. When benevolence, kindness, tenderheartedness, sympathy, are manifest in our lives; when the joy of right doing is in our hearts; when we exalt Christ and not self, we may know that our faith is of the right order. “Hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.” 1 John 2:3.

It is not easy for one who has for many years been striving to bring the old life into perfect conformity to the will of God,

to give up and let the Lord do for him that which he cannot do for himself. But the old life can never be a Christian life. At the best it can only be a modified improvement of the old, which, while it is so much better than the old life left to run as it pleases, is still not the life of a Christian.

Let each person examine himself to see if his life is but a modified improvement of the old or is the true Christian life itself. The eternal life of each depends on our being sure of the answer to this question.

The Great Controversy, p. 468:

In the new birth the heart is brought into harmony with God, as it is brought into accord with His law. When this mighty change has taken place in the sinner, he has passed from death unto life, from sin unto holiness, from transgression and rebellion to obedience and loyalty. The old life of alienation from God has ended; the new life of reconciliation, of faith and love, has begun.