

Conduct Worthy of the Gospel

By George Davis

Do you sometimes feel that the issue of Christian conduct is too difficult to comprehend, let alone do? Everyone seems to have a slightly different standard, and so the lists of expectations change from one gathering to another. What may be considered exceedingly sinful in one may go unnoticed in another.

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel. (Philippians 1:27)

In spite of the endless controversy surrounding Christian conduct, there is only one standard for conduct in Christ's Church. This conduct worthy of the gospel is not adherence to a formal statement of religious belief contained in a pamphlet entitled "This we believe." Creeds, bylaws and church doctrines do not enable this conduct. In fact it has nothing to do with dogma whatsoever. The conduct worthy of the gospel is inspired conduct that grows out of a spiritual seeing that transforms the mind. This conduct does not originate in the human will but is stimulated to action by the revelation of Christ and His sacrifice. This is the standard that was known by the first century Christian community, who had no New Testament canon.



In writing to the Church at Philippi, Paul was writing from prison to encourage a suffering Church in some danger of division. In the midst of their suffering, Paul comforts the Philippian believers with these words. "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake; having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me" (verses 29-30).

Throughout the remainder of this letter, Paul then goes on to explain what that suffering is. It is the fellowship of Christ's suffering - the suffering to which our lord referred when He said to his disciples, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone: but if it die, it brings forth much fruit" (John 12:24). It is the crucifixion Paul referred to

when he wrote, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Galatians 6:14).

Paul goes on to set forth the standard for conduct in Christ's *ekklesia*.

"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."

The Greek word for selfish ambition is *eritheia*, which was used in the time of Aristotle to denote selfish electioneering or intriguing for political office, specifically referring to the desire to put one's self forward in a partisan spirit. Paul then goes on through the rest of Philippians chapter 2 to set forth the standard for worthy conduct.

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (2:1-11)

In this passage Paul is illustrating what he meant by conduct worthy of the gospel of Christ, a life of self-emptying, a life of servanthood progressing down the pathway of the cross, and the ultimate resurrection life. This is the only conduct that is worthy of Christ's great sacrifice.

At the root of division is the ambition to put one's self forward. Such ambition will always result in another fracture in the body of Christ. Christ's mind is the opposite of the previously mentioned, self-promoting, office seeking, vainglory. It is impossible to walk the way of the cross without first refusing self-exaltation. As Jesus said we must first deny ourselves and then take up our cross and follow Him. (See Matthew 16:24). Paul goes on to enumerate those things that must be denied in order to follow Jesus.

The Price of Following Jesus

Paul goes on in chapters three and four of Philippians to count the cost of following the path of the cross

"For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh." (Philippians 3:3)

After recounting his religious pedigree, Paul then goes on to explain what it means to have confidence in the flesh. If anyone could boast about his or her religious achievements, Paul could. If anyone had grounds to trust in their religious accomplishments, Paul did. From his youth, all was done that could be done to insure that Paul's righteousness was perfect.

"...though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ." a(Philippians 3:4-7 NKJV)

Paul's life-long religious achievements had to be given up before he could win Christ. They had to be seen for what they really were. They were as valuable as dung - excrement. They are compared to that substance which is expelled from the body after digestion--that no longer has any nutritional value.

As often is the case, those things that are honorable among men are detestable to God. If we are to follow Jesus we must deny those things that are gain to us. We must count those things that give us notoriety as dung. Even those good religious things in which we find a sense of identity must be counted as loss, a waste of time, for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ (verse 8). We must seek to be found in Him, not having our own righteousness from the law, but the righteousness that is through faith in Christ (verse 9). These things must be denied before we can take up the cross and follow. Before we can know Christ in the power of His resurrection we must know Him in the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death (verse 10). When Paul wrote of being conformed to Christ's death, it is evident that he was referring to the Philippians chapter 2 descent of Christ, through self-emptying to the cross and then to the grave. The grave is a place beyond any hope of physical redemption, a place devoid of any confidence in human efforts, a place of waiting in hope of resurrection.

The grave is a place of utter physical weakness, a place where all plans for the future cease. If God does not resurrect, the grave prevails. Thank God! Resurrection is assured in Christ! "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the word conformity as follows: "To correspond in form or character; be similar. To act or be in accord or agreement; comply. To act in accordance with current customs or modes."

By His very life example, Christ established what was to be considered the acceptable standard of behavior. Only that conduct that conforms to His standard, by His Spirit, is worthy of the gospel. It is to this end alone that the Spirit works.

Paul continues,

"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you." (3:12-15)

As we turn our backs on religion, and follow Jesus outside the camp, bearing His reproach and being made conformable to His death, there is a casting off or forgetting of those religious things in which we previously found our identity

In verse 16 of chapter 3, Paul wrote these words, "Let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind." Paul is exhorting the believers to walk by the same governing rule and to be possessed of the same mind as their Lord. The Philippians chapter 2 mind is the rule or standard for conduct.

The words same mind are an obvious reference to the mind of Christ, mentioned in chapter 2, which motivated Christ to empty himself and become a servant, obedient unto death. It is an attitude that denies promotion or vainglory to take up the cross and

follow. There is no other standard in Christ's Kingdom! All other standards are born of an ambition to approach God without the cross—exalting religious flesh, not Christ.

After having said all this Paul then went on to encourage the Philippian believers to join him on this path. Paul also said that those involved in the same pursuit should be noted as examples.

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. (v.17)

Of the Judaizers who were endeavoring to lead the believers back to a law-based righteousness, Paul wrote, "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ" (verse 18). The Judaizers were enemies of the cross because they attempted to approach God without it. They sought to merit God's favor by their own rightness--the righteousness of the law. Being ignorant of the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ Jesus, they clung to the dung, and favored the fecal matter. That sounds grotesque, but that is exactly how God sees it. They highly valued those things that have no value to God. They set their minds on earthly things--the rudimentary religious principles of the world.

Seeking a sociopolitical expression in the earth, religion aspires to make its mark through temples and ceremonies—striving to manifest its domain through the subjugation of God's children. Paul warned the Colossian believers about people like this. "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8). Religion does indeed mind earthly things, but the one walking the path of the cross is crucified to the rudimentary principles of the world. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." The believer is not to mind earthly things, but to set their affections on thing above, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 20).

Christ and the Canon

Religious man has established a rule of his own. It is not birthed in a new attitude or mind, from within, but is compulsory, imposed from without in an effort to manufacture

uniformity governmentally and thus to bypasses the in-wrought work of grace required to truly transform the mind and effect proper conduct.

The Greek word for rule is *kanon*, from *kane* (a straight reed, i.e. rod). It speaks of a rod or straight piece of rounded wood to which any thing is fastened to keep it straight. It is a measuring rod, or rule--a measuring tape. It also refers to the limits and boundaries of a sphere of activity. It is the straight line drawn in contrast to what is crooked. The standard or measurement in the first century church was the gospel. As the Holy Spirit revealed the mind of Christ to the believers, all that was crooked or self seeking was obvious.

Man was not satisfied with the Holy Spirit's rule and so he created his own standard of measurement, his own rule, or *kanon*. The English word *canon* is also taken from the same Greek word *kanon*, and has come to be used interchangeably to refer to the gospel or any ecclesiastical law or code of laws established by a church council. Thus in many cases the councils of men have been placed on a somewhat equal basis to the teachings of Christ. This is a general characteristic of all that religious man does in the name of God. Everything he touches he degrades. He reduced the gospel story to an ecclesiastical rulebook, to be used to manage the masses. Hence, to me the word *canon* is a word that connotes more than the traditional concept of a standard, but indicates the degrading of the good news to level of ecclesiastic laws. The formulation of the *canon* as an ecclesiastical book of law was with design--to use the gospel to subjugate and control the Christian masses, to use what was intended to promote freedom as a means of bondage.

It was at a time when Rome was considered a "Christian empire", and a Christian Empire must have Christian laws. And so the gospels and epistles were reduced to the level of imperial law. As the issue of control moved from Holy Spirit guidance to a centralized diocese, man politicized the gospel for the purpose of imposing a law-like rule over God's people. This is how Paul's letters became scriptural text. This is how simple letters written from Christian to Christians became mysterious, requiring a line upon line revelation to understand, as though they were writing riddles to each other. Paul himself would disagree. "My letters have been straightforward, and there is nothing written between the lines and nothing you can't understand" (2 Corinthians 1:13 NLT). The idea of these letters being a mystery was propounded to keep the people in the dark. This too was with design to control. History supplies much evidence

of this great dumbing down of the Christian masses, and to the glorious standard of Christ's humility, servanthood, death, and resurrection, being buried beneath a mountain of officially accepted holy dogma.

It is important to stress at this point why the scriptures were given. The New Testament gospels and epistles were never written as law. They are a declaration of a person. They were written to lead the reader to a greater union with Christ, the one who Himself is life. They are written to encourage belief in Jesus. Correct living comes from being joined to Christ—not through obedience to a codified orthodoxy designed to bring an unvarying uniformity of belief and action. God's answer to man's sinful bent is Jesus. Man's answer is the sweatshop of religious legalism. Salvation is a person, not a belief system. And the scriptures were given to attest to a Savior who has been made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption (1Corinthians 1:30). He alone is our wisdom! He alone is our righteousness! He is our sanctification! In all that He was, in all that He did, and in all that He is on our behalf, Jesus is now the sum of our redemption! There is nothing left undone. "It is finished!" Jesus has done it all! But more, He is all and in all!

Consider the following Scriptures.

We have a more sure word of prophecy; the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. (Revelation 19:10)

You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me so that I can give you this eternal life. (John 5:39-40)

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31)

The bible is not a manual of directions but a testimony, the testimony of Jesus. If our doctrines do not lead us to an intimate knowledge of Christ they miss God's mark completely. The scriptures were written that we might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," and that believing we might "have life in His name." The Old Testament scriptures were written as a testimony, leading to Christ. Likewise, the Gospels and the Epistles are testimonies of Jesus. They do not comprise an indexed law book by which we systematically order our lives. They reflect Christ as the moon

reflects the sun. No matter how bright the moon is, it is not the sun. Christ is the Word that the written word merely reflects. We must be careful not to be like the Pharisees, who intently searched the scriptures, thinking that eternal life was found in them, but would not come to Jesus so He could give them eternal life! Eternal life is a gift from Christ, not the fruit of our study. The Bible is a love story, not a rule-book.

I leave you with the following words of Brennan Manning.

"History attests that religion and religious people tend to be narrow. Instead of expanding our capacity for life, joy, and mystery, religion often contracts it. As systematic theology advance, the sense of wonder declines. The paradoxes, contradictions and ambiguities of life are codified, and God himself is cribbed, cabined, and confined within the pages of a leather-bound book. Instead of a love story the Bible is viewed as a detailed manual of directions." (*Abba's Child*)

May Christ abundantly bless you as you deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him!