

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

A small boy asked a new playmate who had come into his neighbourhood, "What abomination do you belong to?" We know what he meant, of course. But a Christian belongs to more than a denomination. He belongs to Christ, and that's not "denomination" but domination - a benevolent domination, something akin to that which life imposes with its natural compulsions.

Nobody quarrels with his lot when a healthy appetite forces him to eat good food or when weariness drops him off to pleasant sleep. Physical life, with its built-in urges, exercises a sort of dictatorship over us. It even makes people enjoy work - creative and purposeful activity being a normal drive in man's makeup.

Christ with meaning used the term "life" in describing the state of the born-again person; but he put new content into the word. He spoke not of ordinary physical life with which every child is born, but of life which operates in the realm of character and moral behaviour - a new principle of life implanted in man's nature by the little-understood miracle of new birth.

Like animal life, this higher type of life is also compulsive, bringing its possessor under domination. The yielded soul in this new divine-human relationship escapes the clutches of sin and comes under the dominion of grace. Romans 6:14. The apostle Paul, in describing the Christian's new experience, didn't hesitate to employ even the concept of slavery to explain this compulsion. See verse 16. All this happens because the individual has received new life. Now he is alive in a different way - "alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Verse 11.

How does one obtain this new quality of life? Jesus in explaining its reception to Nicodemus said simply, "You must be born again." John 3:7. He didn't spell out the process, but he left no doubt of its reality. Furthermore, he made clear that this life, as natural life, operates not in a vacuum but in a context of behaviour. "His deeds ... are wrought in God." John 3:21.

That is why one thus motivated keeps God's commandments, not as a devotee of the gods measuring the road to the temple by successive and laborious body-length prostrations, but as a lover who finds joy in making his beloved happy. For him the doing of God's will is a delight, for God's law is enshrined in his heart.

Why doesn't this miracle happen to everybody? Principally because not everybody wants it. In this birth, unlike physical birth, man exercises a choice. The individual must choose the sovereignty of God, yielding submission to divine control and accepting by faith Heaven's provision for victorious living. How does one go about yielding? Primarily by entering into a transaction, a relationship with God which involves an intelligent agreement to terms.

Christ invites, "Take my yoke upon you." But we can't consent or refuse until we comply with the accompanying command, "Learn of me." Matthew 11:29. We need to know the terms. What does submitting to the yoke of Christ involve? What is God's will?

Right here the Bible comes in and plays a significant role. Men are born again, we read in 1 Peter 1:23, by the Word of God. This assertion does not contradict what Christ told Nicodemus.

The Holy Spirit does indeed effect the transformation, but only when the individual chooses to come under Heaven's discipline. Neither does the assertion explain the entire function of the Bible in the process of godly behaviour.

But it does definitely intimate that to become a disciple of Christ one has to learn. The very term "disciple" means a "learner." One has to receive instruction from the Word of God. And then as he thus understands and accepts the will of God, he is born again and receives a new life from above.

Though the life-giving energy of God's Word cannot be fully explained by human reasoning, it stems partly from this fusion of the human will with a plain "Thus saith the Lord." In this context Bible study takes on new importance. It is not surprising, then, that Jesus, in outlining the great preaching commission, told his followers to teach prospective disciples "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Matthew 28:20.

The change from sinner to disciple had to happen in that order - first, a learning process, an intelligent grasp of terms and obligations; second, an acceptance of those terms, submission to the divine will; then, discipleship through the new birth, witnessed to by baptism.

It still has to happen that way. For this reason no moral rebirth takes place in man apart from hearing or reading the Word. And conversely, for this reason changes do take place in men's lives following any purposeful revival of Bible study. Dr Eugene Nida of the American Bible Society tells of Don Venancio who obtained a Bible from a traveller along the International Highway leading through Ixmiquilpan, a poverty-stricken region 300 kms north of Mexico City. Its message gripped him, inspiring him to share the Word of God with his friends. Gradually a community of changed men and women sprang up, people who measured their lives by the standards of the Bible. When a government official dealing with economic rehabilitation was asked what the government had done for this particular group, he said, "We don't need to help them; in fact, we like to hire them to assist others."

Incorporating the principles of the Bible into their conduct, these people had developed a reputation for industry, co-operation, honesty, and concern for others. Acceptance of the will of God as taught in the Scriptures had brought into their souls the life of the Infinite One.

Perhaps Jesus had such possibilities in mind when he spoke those words in John 12:50: "I know that His (the Father's) commands are eternal life."

And certainly Moses, centuries before, spoke of this direct relationship between acceptance of God's laws and the higher quality of life when he admonished the Hebrew refugees on their way to Canaan: "You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live." Deuteronomy 5:33.

When a New York Juvenile court judge sentenced a teen-age delinquent to read the Ten Commandments, the young offender replied, "What are they?" How could he agree to obey God's law if he didn't know what it requires? And how can anyone accept God's dominion over his life without knowing God's terms? Until he knows them he can't surrender, and until he surrenders he cannot be born again and receive the life of God.

Plutarch's students, states a legend from Greek medical lore, tried to make a dead man stand on his feet. They made many attempts but found it impossible. After trying various methods, they reported to their master that "something was missing on the inside."

Likewise men without the heavenly gift of life lack something on the inside. Thus incapacitated, they cannot please God, "for the outlook of the lower nature is enmity with God," states Paul in Romans 8:7; "it is not subject to the law of God; indeed it cannot be." Recognition of this problem underscores the need of Bible study. "A return to the Bible," pleads Dr. Billy Graham, "will strengthen our home life, ... reverse the terrifying crime statistics, ... do more for race relations than any single thing we could do, ... give purpose to our young people, ... restore a high sense of destiny to our nation, ... bring our nation to its finest hour."

The Bible when studied acquaints people with God's terms for membership in His kingdom and places them in a position to make the greatest decision of life - a decision that will bring them the gift of divine life.