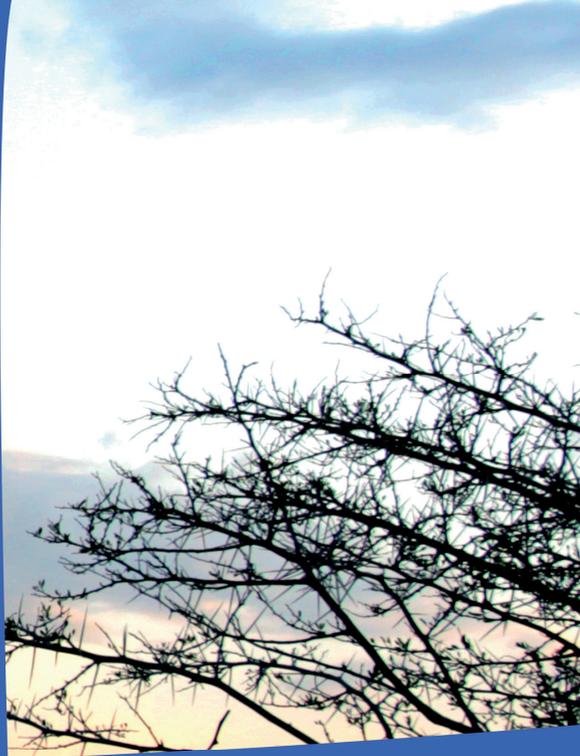




What is the 'Normal' Christian life?

Written by Keith Parker

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WHAT IS THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE?

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This is a very relevant question to be asked in these days, when we are bombarded from many directions by teachers, who believe have heavenly wisdom to tell how to live as Christians. It is only true to say that some of the things they are teaching we would never have discovered for ourselves by a straightforward reading of God's Word. Derek is writing about specific dangers to the Body of Messiah in Israel caused by "diverse and strange doctrines" which we are warned about in Many of these ideas have come in via western 'evangelical' sources. Strangely some of the 'new' insights involve mystical methodology derived from Eastern Orthodox & Roman Catholic traditions: such things as "Centering Prayer" and "contemplative prayer".

I confess to having all sorts of problems with so many of these new revelations. To begin with it seems a sensible thing to ask, 'Where do we find these teachings clearly and lucidly explained for us in the Bible?' Of course it is no new thing to have to face ideas newly brought in, frequently, though not always, transatlantic in origin. One remembers well, during the 70s, 80s and 90s of the last century, hearing teachings which were basically different from those one had been brought up with. At first the tendency was to accept them uncritically, partly because they were taught by men who seemed powerfully anointed, and partly because they seemed exciting and different from the 'old dusty doctrines' we had started

to grow tired of. To question them seemed to border on the blasphemous. My final way out from the confusion was to ask that old question: "Where does the Bible teach this?" Jeremiah had it right when he said "Ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls" (Jeremiah 6:16)

You need to read what I am saying alongside Derek's; I don't want to repeat his article! Let's go back to the beginning of the Church, just after the Day of Pentecost and remind ourselves of the foundations for daily Christian life laid down then. "They that gladly received his word were baptized... they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread and in prayers".

The whole thing begins in gladly receiving the preached word

Romans chapter 10 tells us that 'faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God'. As a general rule, nobody is going to get saved without some communication of the gospel to them. So it is that Christians should be a 'witnessing' people, a people ready to share their faith with others. Some Christians are better at this than others, bus.

There is the response of baptism, which includes repentance and faith

The Christian life cannot exist where there is no radical break with our sinful past. It involves a personal faith in the Lord Jesus as our Saviour, sin-bearer and Lord, a heartfelt turning from our sins and our own ways, sealed

by baptism in water. True conversion cannot be dispensed with. I believe a great deal of the falling away we see today among professing Christians finds its roots in an inadequate conversion.

The Doctrine of the Apostles comes next

The apostles' doctrine was nothing more than the teaching of Jesus Christ, and his teaching was the fulfilment of the message of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings of the Old Testament. Just as the Christian life begins with the proclamation of the Word, so it is nurtured by the regular teaching of the Word of God, the Bible, seen as pointing to the Lord Jesus as the only way to God. Regular teaching from the Bible is indispensable. Our Christian life should not be founded on experiences, however wonderful. Miracles & prophetic utterances are not the daily bread of the Christian, but the teaching of the Bible is.

The reason many Christians go astray into fanciful and weird teachings is that the word of God is not given its paramount place. One remembers that in some of the wilder manifestations connected with the 'Toronto Blessing' and the Pensacola teaching (to take an example) some teachers said that you didn't need the Bible if you had the manifestation of the Spirit. But the truth is that you can only discern what is truly of the Holy Spirit in the light of his own normative revelation in Holy Scripture.

Fellowship is important

Fellowship has become a most devalued word in Christian circles. It has degenerated into any activity (from drinking tea to having a Christmas party) that is done with brother Christians. In Greek it is 'koinonia', or 'what we have in common'. And what we have in common is the Lord Jesus himself. We need to talk much about Jesus when we are together. Remember the example of the Old Covenant saint "Then they that feared the LORD spoke often one to another and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD and thought upon his name" (Malachi 3:16). We often finish our meetings by 'saying the Grace', don't we? That is a Trinitarian blessing, and the third part speaks of 'The fellowship of the Holy spirit'. Surely that fellowship must go much deeper than mere chit-chat. The Holy Spirit's ministry is to witness to Jesus, so that underlines afresh that the Lord Jesus should be at the centre of our fellowship.

Breaking of bread

This can mean a fellowship meal; but specifically it means the Lord's Supper, where we remember the death of Christ till his coming again. The Passover was a once-yearly celebration, but neither Christ nor his apostles laid down any rules as to how frequently we should 'break bread'. Because we are weak and human, we need to remember the Lord's death more than once a year, for in the words of the old hymn, 'I forget so soon'. Baptism is a once-for-all ordinance, witnessing to the once-for-

all-ness of our new birth. The Lord's Supper is frequent, pointing up that we need to feed upon Jesus at all times. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are given to us as a seal and sign of the spiritual reality of regeneration and feeding on Christ. They do not guarantee that we shall have these realities in our lives, but they are powerful witnesses to true Christian experience.

The words in the original suggest that it is prayer meetings which are intended. Clearly any believer should practise prayer privately.

, as Jesus commanded in Matthew 6:6. But one of the marks of normal Christian living is to meet with other Christians to seek God's presence together in shared prayer. Prayer includes confession of sins, when necessary. It involves adoration of our mighty God. Worship is part of prayer; and that is far more than singing. 'Worship' in both Hebrew and Greek implies a falling down in adoration. Prayer includes petitions, specific things we ask of God. Because he is our Father there is nothing too small for him to hear from his children.

Intercession is an important aspect of prayer. Intercession means coming in between God and any needy group of people to seek his intervention on their behalf. It may be crying out for suffering Christians in today's world; it may mean asking God to have mercy on our own country; for those reading this magazine it means also praying for God's mercy and salvation upon Israel, and especially the congregations of believers in Jesus within the land. I remember once hearing

some teaching about intercession, which gave such an exalted view of it that I for one felt that I would never be able to be an intercessor! It was only when I meditated on Abraham's prayer for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter 18, where we see Abraham interceding with God that I found I had hope of being an intercessor. I noticed several things:

(a) he had revelation from God that God would himself go and find out about the state of the cities of the plain. Abraham knew what they were like, so he knew that God would judge them;

(b) Abraham prays for the righteous in those cities (really for his nephew Lot);

(c) his attitude towards God is extremely reverent and humble: he doesn't give God orders as to what the Almighty should do;

(d) he accepts that God will judge those cities, and ceases to pray when he knows that ten righteous persons is the minimum God will accept to withhold judgment from the majority. You could say that Abraham's prayer is both simple and business-like. He certainly doesn't imagine that he can change God's mind. Abraham's experience in prayer seems to be that praying helps to bring his human mind in line with the mind of God, not the other way round. We as praying Christians surely have much to learn from Abraham's example. I am reminded that, in the case of Jeremiah, God finally ordered

him to stop asking for blessing on the Jerusalem of his day, because God had finally determined that he would judge a nation that was completely impenitent. what to pray for in respect of Israel, or anybody else for that matter? First we have the apostles' doctrine. The word of God, which the apostles brought to us, will make it clear how we should pray. Then we have fellowship with the Lord Jesus and our brother Christians, which will clarify anything we aren't sure about. Then the regular breaking of bread should keep us humbly trusting in what Christ has done for us through the blood of his cross.