

# STRAIGHTWAY

"And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him" [Mark 1:18].

## CHRISTIAN PURITIES FELLOWSHIP

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### "The Death of Character"

By Dr. H. T. Spence, President of Foundations Bible College

*That they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour  
in all things (Titus 2:10)*

Although historians are still debating whether this country was truly "Christian" from its inception, America definitely was a righteous nation in its beginning. Proverbs 14:34 states that "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people." This righteousness is not in reference to the righteousness found in Christ for salvation; rather, a natural righteousness to be found in a nation's morals and leadership. Because of America's respect for righteousness in its early years, God honored and exalted this nation.

One of the crucial attributes found in the birth of our nation was the "character ethic." In spite of the fact that America's

founding fathers held a variety of religious beliefs, these men mutually believed that this new nation could experience the benevolence of God and a providential success if character were the foundation of living. Such men believed that in order to succeed an individual had to possess inner values. The fruit of such principles in the founding of our beloved nation has proved the fact that *who we are* is more important than *who we appear to be*.

#### Early American Education

Noah Webster, the Father of American Education and compiler of the first American dictionary, imperatively advocated *moral* education to be an

inseparable part of education itself. If one were to carefully study the early curricula of American's education, he would see that the training of the student's heart and mind toward a good life involved many things. These curricula required the student to learn rules and precepts, do's and don'ts, concepts of right and wrong, and to distinguish between good and evil in order to produce a successful life. These have been part of true education all the way back through our America's history.

The early educational principles also necessitated a central importance of "moral example." This importance required the adult world to give an example to the student world of a life of character. Men like Noah Webster believed that there was nothing more influential in a child's life than the moral power of example. They knew that for children to take morality seriously, they must be in the presence of adults who take morality seriously.

## **The Character Ethic vs. Personality Ethic**

With the rise of the Industrial Age, America entered a very sad period, especially in the years following World War I. The basic view of success at this time shifted from a "character ethic" to a "personality ethic." Success began to be measured on the basis of the charm, skill, and artful technique of one's personality. Rather than struggling with what is right or wrong, society's leadership—through men such as Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie—learned how to make things run smoothly. Pragmatism and Positivism became the cloaks to cover up wrong. Whatever was expedient and yielded good results was justified in life.

This personality ethic brought a new breed of leaders into the arenas of politics, music, sports, education, etc. They denounced the need of character as an important factor to be role model for the world; character was no longer an essential to become a leader in society. They belittled and even intimidated the belief that inner values in a man or woman mattered.

Modernity and the "contemporary" have brought us into a great quandary: are talent, human energy, and personality the only things needed for success? The evident casualties of recent decades have proved that a country, a family, a ministry, or even the individual cannot ultimately survive without character. This is why in the great folly of characterless

## **STRAIGHTWAY**

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and immoral leadership in Washington we have heard the cries of a few who continue to warn us of such folly. General Schwarzkoph pleaded two years ago in his address to the West Point graduates that character was absolutely essential for its cadets. He made it clear that morale, respect and fidelity would never be known among soldiers in battle without character in the leadership. As another voice of equal alarm, William Bennett, the former Secretary of Education, has published numerous books pleading with American educators to return to the teachings of virtue and character. He firmly believes that American education has become bankrupt of it all.

The rhetoric of risqué leadership through the modern media has Americans believing that character is no longer needed in order to give direction and stability to a society. In fact, present society mocks, maligns, ridicules, and intimidates character, while tolerating lying, dishonesty, and infidelity in the norm of public leadership. However, the history of civilizations has proved that when character dies, a nation dies. When character dies in a politician, he or she is not fit to lead. When character dies in a minister, he is not fit to minister. When character dies in a teacher, he or she is not fit to teach. When character dies the quality of living dies. We are witnessing in the White House, Congress, America's sports arenas, music halls, and educational systems, and even in the pulpits of conservative churches the death of the "Character ethic."

## Biblical Character

What is character and of what is it a product? The term character itself comes from the Greek word *charakter*, extending from an older term *charasso*, meaning "to cut, to scratch, to mark." It was first used as the agent (thus seen in the ending "ter") or tool that did the marking, as the mark or impress made, and finally the exact reproduction. The "exact reproduction" of a person is the better understanding of this Greek word. Character to a Christian is the cutting of the image of Christ into the life by the tools of grace, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit. Sharpening our focus on the word, character is a life dominated by biblical principles. It becomes the clothing for the **self-life** in Christ. Character comes from within and then works outward. Character is principle and integrity laying hold of a person's inner fountain—his heart—and dominating him in motive and actions of life. In the Christian realm character is Bible principles dominating the purpose and doings of the Christian life. The Bible beseeches all Christians to seek biblical character. God demands it in a leader's life. The Pastoral Epistles call not only for "sound doctrine" to be among God's people but also exhorts for sound doctrine to be "adorned." Godly character is this adorning of sound doctrine.

### Character: A Need Among Preachers

We will readily acknowledge that preachers have infirmities, and

they certainly have their weaknesses and shortcomings. But there are some “weaknesses” that are inexcusable and become insights to the very weakness of character. Every preacher must pray and long for character to be in every compartment of his life. When character is lost, all his influence is lost. It is better to be poor, better to be cast into prison, or condemned to perpetual slavery than to be destitute of character and endure the pains and evils of a conscious worthlessness of godliness. Do not confuse character with reputation. Character is what a man is in God; reputation is what he is thought to be by others. Character is always real; reputation may be false. A preacher may have good character and a bad reputation; however, he may have a good reputation and a bad character. Most men are more anxious about their reputation than they are about their character. While every minister should endeavor to maintain a good reputation, he should especially guard his true self in God. Character is not something that can be attached to a minister’s ordination certificate, nor does it come by the laying on of hands. It is not an inheritance from parents; it is not created by external advantages; it does not come as a benefit in pastoring the largest church in the city. It is the result of a life lived with Christ! One can have his or her sins forgiven instantly by the provision of the blood, but it will take a life to produce character.

Our influence will not only be our sermons, prayers, visitation, counseling, etc. but also our char-

acter from which these things will flow. Wherever we are or go, our character is affecting others.

### **The Character of Sobriety**

Within the thesaurus of attributes and virtues to be found in the building of character, there are two needs imperative for a true and stable life. The first need is found in the word *sober* or *sobriety*. The Greeks used this word originally in identification with the physical world, meaning to “be free from intoxicants.” But as this word unfolded in history, sobriety came to mean “soundness of mind,” or sound judgment. By the time *sobriety* was used in the Kione Greek of the New Testament Scriptures, it was presented as the habitual, inner self-government with its constant reign on all the passions and desires. Such passions and desires are to receive no further allowance than what the law and right reason admits. Jeremy Taylor, the great preacher of the 1600s, in his book *Holy Living and Holy Dying* called sobriety “reason’s girdle” and “passion’s bridle.”

The word *sobriety* in this context is of great importance for our society that is given over to passions. Many years ago a number of thresholds in human desire were not crossed until an individual had reached his or her late teens and early twenties. However today, desires in the human body are being prematurely awakened and intensified by the various forms of media and technological enhancements of virtual reality. The media,

and in return the peer pressure of society are forcing our youth into a sexual explosion of mind and body at a much earlier age. The call to sobriety, with its inner self-government and constant reign on all the passions and desires, is being thrown to the wind. Because of the abounding of promiscuity and loose living in today's society, sobriety is no longer believed to be essential. And because of the "abounding of iniquity" (or lawlessness: not living under law and principle), the love for God and right living is waxing cold.

For centuries Roman Catholicism has taught that God created man with intense desires which they have called "concupiscence." The priests have been taught in the seminaries that man must live with concupiscence and suppress it the best he can. They do not believe it is a result of the fall of man. For this reason it is almost unheard of for a priest's orders to be revoked as a result of any act of fornication. The diocese simply transfers him to another diocese where the parishioners do not know of him or his sins of fornication. There is a growing cover-up of such insobriety among Roman Catholic priests across America. This belief has carried over to the Protestant camp, evidenced in the proliferation of adultery and sodomy among laymen and ministers. Men today give in to rape, child molestation, drugs, infidelity of marriage, and other lawless passions. Society's judiciary system even caters to a people without sobriety by providing financial and institutional assistance to either

alleviate the fruit of their sin or force society to tolerate their sin. It is a growing belief in America that man is no longer accountable for his failures and sins; these are often blamed on his family background, his genetic deficiency, his lack of education, his underprivileged childhood, or even society itself.

However, the Bible is emphatically clear that man is accountable for what he does. In spite of teachings on the theological decrees and allegiance to Sovereignty, one can never blame God for giving into sin and its passions. One cannot blame astrological signs for their failures; one cannot even blame the devil. Paul tells us in I Corinthians 9:27, "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means when I have preached to others I myself should become a castaway."

In Titus 2, the word *sobriety* becomes the common denominator of character among the various ages of Christians. In verse 2, the "aged men" are to be "sober"; in verses 3 and 4, we read that the "aged women" are to "teach the young women to be sober"; and in verse 6, the "young men likewise exhort to be sober minded." I Timothy 3 addresses the need of bishops being "blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, **sober**, of good behavior." Verse 11 states that this character is also to be found of a deacon. Sobriety is becoming a rare character trait of church leaders today. We are called upon to live a self-disciplined life with control over our passions and desires.

## The Character of Shamefacedness

But there is another imperative need of equal importance with *sobriety*. It is found in I Timothy 2:9 in the word *shamefacedness*. To understand this particular word we must see how it has changed over the years. The word *fast*, which simply means, "to hold firmly," has been used as a suffix to other words: *rootfast*, *handfast*, *bedfast*, and *weatherfast*. *Shamefast* was a word that meant, "made fast by an honorable shame." In the original Authorized Version of 1611, the word used in I Timothy 2:9 concerning women was *shamefastness*. But in the 1700s the word was changed to *shamefacedness*. This word is a synonym to *prudent* meaning "to blush" or "shame of the face." It is a term of modesty and an insight to a woman who would shrink from crossing the limits of womanly reservation. Yet, it is also a word that clearly marks the reason a woman would not perform an evil—it is not in her **heart** to commit the evil.

An important distinction must be made between the character of sobriety and shamefacedness as noted of godly women in I Timothy 2:9. Sobriety is the sign of inner self-government with a constant reign on all the passions and desires. It is when a person masters or has control over the passions and desires of his life. But shamefacedness is modesty of thought about self; it is "fast" or rooted in the character of the heart. Sobriety is calling upon self-control over the cry of physical and fleshly desires. But shamefacedness de-

clares that it is not in the root of one's character to yield to those desires. It is one thing to not do a wrong because of self-control over the temptation, but it is a higher principle to not do the wrong because it is not in the heart to do it.

## The Example of Samson and Joseph

Samson and Joseph, step forward from the sacred annals of Scripture as classic illustrations of the distinction between sobriety and shamefacedness. It is evident in the book of Judges that Samson, though used of God, was a man of loose living. Chapter sixteen depicts Samson meeting the woman Delilah in the valley of Sorek. For several days she enticed him to find out wherein lay his strength. Each time his response brought him closer to the truth of the matter. For a season Samson gave evidence of sobriety by marking his answers with self-control. But then the Scriptures read, "and it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death; that he told her all his heart...." (Judges 16:16,17a).

On the other hand Joseph was enticed by a woman in Genesis thirty-nine. In verses 8 and 9, his response to the pressing of Potiphar's wife was that "he refused, and said unto his master's wife, Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he

kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" Potiphar's wife spoke to Joseph day by day, as Delilah did to Samson. But it is said of Joseph that "he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her or to be with her" (Judges 39:10). The conclusion of this story reveals that Joseph had not only sobriety but also shamefacedness, for it was **not in his heart** to commit this sin.

### Final Thoughts

We are living in a scandalous time in the history of our country. Sobriety has been thrown to the wind in order for men to satisfy their lusts. We have had a President in the White House for the past eight years whose immoral living has become the brunt of media comedy and openly discussed by other politicians. In recent months the "strange" insobriety of the Hillsdale College president George Roche, has grieved the conservative camp of America. The insobriety of Jimmy Swaggart and other ministers are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to uncontrollable lusts evident among many in the ministry. The telling-tale is that though many preach the Gospel of Christ, the principles of the Gospel are not part of their own heart and life. The Vows of marriage have become meaningless as separation and divorce are of epidemic proportion. In our day and time, sobriety is certainly needed—yea God demands it—among God's people, especially in church leader-

ship. But shamefacedness portrays character with a deeper meaning. It goes beyond self-control over passion and lusts. Shamefacedness is in the heart, empowered by God and His Word, crying out, "No!" It is the evidence of a heart and life dominated by biblical principles.

Our society has been convinced that it does not matter what a person "is" so long as he is able to "perform" and "function" in a positive manner in his job. Whether it is running a country, keeping the program going in a church, or providing for family, results, not character, is what counts today. Yet the unalterable law of providence decrees that a collapse is inevitable. As we witness the death of character in our nation and the rise of personalities in society, let us keep true to a self-controlled life in sobriety as well as the evident heart against wrong in shamefacedness. Yes, there is an urgent need in Christianity today for the adorning of the doctrine of Christ with godly character. For it is still a true statement: the greatest attraction to Christ is a godly life.

**The king's daughter is all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought unto the king in raiment of needlework: the virgins her companions that follow her shall be brought unto thee (Psalm 45:13-14)**

May God give us such clothing within, the clothing of the self-life in Christ: Godly character.

# **A NEW PUBLICATION**

by

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## **The Obedience of Faith**

Let no one accuse Luther of boasting, when through "the obedience of faith" he reached that deadness to sin, and that conscious fullness of the divine life, which enabled him to say: "If any man knocks at the door of my breast, and says, Who lives here? My answer is, Jesus Christ lives here, not Martin Luther." The great reformer did not stumble into this Christian experience. To reach it he was often closeted with God three hours a day, studying the divine promises and wrestling with the Lord, as Jacob with the angel. Says Spurgeon: "There is a point in grace as much above the ordinary Christian as the ordinary Christian is above the worldling." Of such he says: "Their place is with the eagle in his eyrie, high aloft. They are rejoicing Christians, holy and devout men, doing service for the Master all over the world, and everywhere conquerors through Him that loved them." The mountaintop is a position men do not slide into but climb up to. Thus these mountaintop saints climbed up the ascent by the stairway of the gospel promises, with the sunlit summit in full view as a definite aim.

—Daniel Steele, 19<sup>th</sup> century—

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