

Chapter 5

Traits of Christian Personality



St. Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles is probably an incomparably great missionary. *The Acts of the Apostles* gives an account of his pre-conversion and post-conversion life. St Paul is a man with many titles. In his pre-conversion life he was a tent maker by profession, a pharisaic Jew by religious affiliation, a roman citizen by birth and a persecutor of Christians by social persuasion (Acts 9). After his conversion he was deemed a traitor by the Pharisees, a suspect by Peter and James, an apostle to gentiles by his companions, an antagonistic preacher by the Jews a lover of Jesus Christ and a martyr for the Christian faith. Around the year 37, at the age of thirty, St. Paul travelled the 168 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest and bring back to Jerusalem for trial, the members of the new Christian movement. Those were his plans but God had other plans for Paul. Man proposes and God disposes! And he surrendered his life and plans to God by a life-changing experience on the Damascus road. This divine intervention was God's way of making him a worthy instrument for the conversion of many. After that fair encounter he developed a deep intimacy with Jesus and became His eloquent spoke-person. The issues he addressed in his letters were his own inner struggles of post-conversion-period. Renouncing his old self and assuming a new one in Jesus Christ, as expressed in Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" is the testimony he will share with us.

Major Traits of Christian Personality

We were discussing the ways and means of forming Christian identity in the previous chapter. It will be helpful if we learn the specific factors that contribute to the Christian identity. We may identify three basic traits in the formation of the same. They are: Christian Vision of Life, Christian Attitude (Outlook), Christian Life Style.

Christian Vision of Life

Christian Vision of life is something that directs one's total view-point and attitude. Lifestyle points to one's behavioral pattern depending on the circumstances. It regulates our Christian attitudes and helps us to be authentic. It shapes our view-points at various levels of life. Jesus teaches that God is our Father and all human beings are brothers and sisters. Life of Jesus was both God-centered and human-centered.

True Christians are those who follow and try to live out the vision of Jesus. From this basic understanding, other tenets of Christian life can be formed. There are five aspects of Christian vision of life.

1) God our Father (Vision of God)

It is fundamental to Christian outlook to harbor the awareness that we are the children of God. When we grow in this consciousness, we can establish a special relationship with God. Jesus taught us to pray to God, addressing him, 'Our Father in heaven'. Again Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). We will truly become God's children when we seek to fulfill God's will. It is the awareness borne out of the son-father relationship just as Christ himself grew up. We will become God's children when we fulfill our responsibilities sincerely and do it according to the will of God.

2. We are God's Children (Spiritual Vision)

It is again a heightened awareness that we are all God's children. We are created with the divine potential to become sons of God. It is realized when we profess faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

St. John testifies, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." (Jn 1:12). Apostle John confirms this fact in his Letter, "See, what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" (1 Jn 3:1).

3) We are Brothers in Christ (Vision of Man)

This consciousness helps us to consider ourselves that God is our common father. If we are the children of this Father in heaven we must consider others as our brothers and sisters, irrespective of religion, caste or country. This universal message of common brotherhood is affirmed by Jesus himself when he said, "Love your neighbour as yourself." This is a very noble and enriching vision of man. As true Christians we are given his divine grace to relate ourselves with others in Christ, who died and rose again for the whole world. When we grow in this universal value we will be able to stand above all discriminations on the basis of colour, caste, creed or nation.

4. World our Earthly Home (Cosmic Vision)

This vision is influenced by our awareness that God is our Father and all are brothers and sisters. This concept helps us to formulate a positive vision of the world. The primary Christian understanding is that our earthly home is only a tent and all the creatures of the world around us are created and given to us for a temporary purpose. We are urged to live in our temporary home respecting each other and accepting help from the other. It is also our duty to protect our environment keeping it pollution-free. Our Christian vision must help us to love the nature and to respect the cultures of the people.

5. Heaven, our Ultimate Goal (Vision of Heaven)

Christian outlook of life is not restricted to a life on earth. It points to a life hereafter. It reminds us that death is not the end of our life but a way to ensure life everlasting. The ultimate goal of our life is to reach God who is the fountain of life and goodness. This orientation gives us a sense of purpose to Christian life. St. Paul writes, "For we know that if the earthly tent, we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling" (2 Cor 5:1-2). Lack of conviction and understanding about eternity may lead many to depression and laziness. Christians who accept God as the ultimate goal of life confidently and courageously face any problem and move forward finding fulfillment in life.

Christian Attitude

Attitudes are formed in the light of an individual's vision of life. A vision of life formed at the intellectual level, has to be reoriented to right attitudes. We are individually responsible for regulating our outlook on life as well as attitudes. Not the state of the body but the state of the soul is the test of the well-being. An African American educator, Booker T Washington, was keenly aware of his identity when he vowed, "I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him." This is the self-improvement attitude.

Instead of wasting valuable energies in unproductive arguments, one must draw inspiration from Christian values to fulfill one's vision. We have life in abundance, we must be conscious of promises of Christ. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). A happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances but a person with certain set of right attitudes. The most important attitudes to be formed and fostered in a person are: 1. Right attitude toward God, 2. Right attitude toward fellowmen and 3. Right attitude toward the world.

The Christian must maintain the vision of God as Father, people as brethren and the world as a place given to dwell in. Our ultimate aim of life is to reach heaven. These realities must help us to form right attitudes. The important aspects of Christian attitudes are: 1. Divine Providence. 2. Universal Brotherhood. 3. A Sense of Goodness and Optimism.

1. Sense of Divine Providence

This is the Christian attitude of dependence on God. A Christian is a person who is convinced that he is a child of God the father. This conscious relationship will create in him certain emotions and positive attitudes that help him to develop a sense of dependence on God. Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me" (Jn 14:1).

As Christians we are called to live our lives according to the word of God with a sense of dependence on Him. When we live with total dependence on God there will not have any room for negative attitudes such as disappointment, depression, anger, etc. We will be always experiencing the protecting presence of God. We are assured that, God will never reject us even if our mother forgets us. Such an attitude of dependence on God will help us to lead a happy, healthy life with a sense of fulfillment. Let us call to mind the encouraging words of the prophet Isaiah on God's promise in this regard. We read, "See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me" (Is 49:16). We are sure that God our heavenly father will take care of us always. We shall trust him, believing that nothing is impossible for God.

2. Attitude of Fraternity (Human Solidarity)

Created in the image of the one God, and endowed with rational soul, all men have the same nature, and same origin. Redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to participate in the same divine beatitude and enjoy equal dignity. At birth, man is not equipped with everything he needs for developing his bodily and spiritual life. He needs the support and protection of others. Human talents also vary in kind and degree. These differences belong to God's plan that each may receive what she or he needs from others. These differences encourage and often oblige persons to practice generosity, kindness, and sharing of goods. They foster mutuality and reciprocity.

The principle of solidarity is a direct demand of human and Christian brotherhood. International solidarity is a requirement of moral order and world peace. This attitude of friendship must go beyond material goods. In spreading the spiritual good of the faith, the Church has adopted new ways clinging to Jesus' words, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33).

This attitude of universal solidarity is an eminent Christian virtue. It promotes sharing of spiritual and material goods. This virtue promotes an attitude to treat others as brothers and sisters, irrespective of religion or cast. The powerful teaching of Jesus inspires us to stand for others as Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it me” (Mt 25:40). In Luke we read the golden rule, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Lk 6:31). St. Paul reminds, “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10).

3. A Sense of Goodness and Optimism

This is a positive attitude that enables us to see goodness in others and helps to treat them with equal respect. A follower of Christ must do well and encourage others to do so. St. Paul urges us when he said, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21). God is the source of all goodness and a God-centered person must reflect that goodness by promoting the attitude of Jesus.

This positive attitude has its roots in the abiding goodness of God, but the cynical attitude is harmful. Negative attitude looks at bleak side of life while optimism looks the sunny side! Ralph Waldo Emerson wisely said, “The optimists know that their “welfare is dear to the heart of being” and that the universe is a hospitable space.

Goodness is always an asset. To be good is a great. The optimists believe that in the long run truth will prevail but optimism doesn't necessarily mean that nothing unseemly can happen to you. Everyone faces challenges. The optimist knows that every situation has the potential for good. The intent of the optimist is to discover what is good. Human psychology affirms as ever before that positive things put the people to sure success. St. Paul affirms, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). Nobody can disappoint or defeat us if we hold fast to God in thoughts, deeds and words. This is the simple principle of Christian life. We too must share the spirit of St. Paul who writes, “What then are we to say about these things? if God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

Christian Life-Style

So far we have been discussing the special traits of Christian identity, vision and attitude. Life style is the way in which a person or group of people lives and works. When we adopt a Christian style of life, formed and supported by right attitudes we develop our Christian personality. If we shape our personality after the model of Christ we will be God-centered and our personality will be Christ-oriented.

To live, mankind must recover its essential humanness and innate divinity. A Christian must shape his personality in order to recover his capacity for humanity, sanity and integrity. One's

character and identity can be gauged in terms of his inner self, commitments, sincerity and purpose of life and his willingness to continue growing up gracefully. A man, who has shaped his lifestyle after Christ, can affirm that he is a child of God. In him he lives and moves. He feels he is strong, joyful and vital. No doubt the Kingdom of God is within him.

Let us give priority to shape our Christian personality and life style after the heart of Jesus. Here we can notice certain specific qualities in a person who is transformed in to the lifestyle of Jesus. These qualities are: 1. Love of God 2. Love of others 3. Love of enemy 4. Love of service-mindedness.

1. Love of God

Viewed from the side of God, there is no right on the part of man as there is immeasurable inequality between God and man. We have received everything from our creator. God has loved us from eternity and without the love of God none can lead a genuine Christian life. The marker of all commandments is love of God. Inspired by the love of God we are bound to love our neighbours. The first and foremost commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk 12:30). So love of God is our primary concern and it is a moving force for a true Christian life. This love of God is expressed through worship, proclamation of the word of God, prayer and charitable activities etc.

2. Love of our Fellowmen

Christian identity is marked by our love towards our neighbours. The charity of Christ is the source of all our qualities. Grace by uniting us to Christ in active love, ensures the supernatural quality and merit before God and men. The saints have always kept a lively awareness that their identity is Christ-centered. Jesus said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34). As a definite commandment from God, we are bound to love our neighbors. Jesus again says, "There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mk 12:29-31; Lk 10:25-28; Mt 22:34-40). Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). The early Christians were known by their love for one another. Tertullian exclaims, "See when we hate one another, they (early Christians) show great love for one another, when we kill each other they die for each other". The glowing examples of early Christians must inspire us to lead a meaningful Christian life based on charity.

3. Love of the Enemy

This is the unselfish love that gives itself and expects nothing in return. We have a choice always. We can let the garden of life grow wild or we can make it into a place of unimaginable loveliness. One of the most important tools can be our willingness to extend our love to enemies. When we love we make them cease to be enemies. Love has to spring spontaneously from within. Love and coercion can never go together. Love can be awakened through love of God and oneself. It is essentially self-communicative. We can gain this power to love from Jesus, our perfect model. Love is unconquerable and goes on gathering power, spreading itself, until eventually it transforms whom it touches.

Consistent practice is not only for musicians, athletes and others to develop their skills. To love the enemies we shall practice love until it becomes a second nature. It includes feeling good for others as well as for oneself. Christian love shown toward one's enemy is the noblest virtue. It is the surest expression of one's Christian identity. Jesus commands us, "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:44-45). Jesus died on the cross showing exceptional love for his enemies. The teaching and example of Jesus in this regard is unique.

By our prayer, forbearance and patient-waiting we can save, serve, and win over our enemies. The valuable and powerful example of Jesus and the saints must inspire us to lead a fruitful Christian life.

4. Service-mindedness

This is the readiness to be at the service of others, particularly, the sick, the poor, the destitute and the neglected. True Christianity demands an all-embracing love and wholehearted service to the suffering brotheren. Jesus recognizes our good-will. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Our vocation is to accept all and extend every possible help irrespective of religion, language, caste or gender. We can grow in our Christian personality by dealing and practicing the precepts of Jesus Christ. Thus, we can make the presence of Christ felt in our day to day lives. Jesus teaches us to give and not to count the cost; to toil and not to seek rest (Ignatius Loyola). Man can be restored to God by Christ, know God through Christ and can become like God in Christ (G. C. Mrogan). Our lives must be a powerful sermon like that of Mrs. Gladys Staines wife of Graham Staines. While pardoning her enemies who charred to death her beloved husband and two children, she was witnessing and living Christ's teaching on love towards enemies . This is an example of Christian identity.

I. Let us Discuss

1. We grow in Christian identity by adopting the value of Christian vision. Discuss.
2. How do you co-relate the Christian vision, lifestyle and attitude for the formation of Christian identity?

II. Let us find out the Answers

1. What prompted St. Paul to declare, 'I live, not I, but Christ lives in me'?
2. What are the basic traits of Christian personality?
3. What do you mean by Christian vision of life?
4. What is your understanding on Christian attitude? Clarify certain aspects of Christian outlook?
5. What are the specific features which can be identified in a person who adopts the lifestyle of Christ?

III. Activity

Prepare a chart, pointing out the necessary requirements for Christian identity.

IV. Let us Read and Reflect

Romans 12:9-21.