

WHAT IS RELIGION DOING TO YOUR CHARACTER?

*Character, like a photograph
develops in darkness.*

(Yousuf Karsh, portrait photographer)

We mass-produce almost everything in our country, but we cannot mass-produce character, because that is a matter of personal identity. It belongs to those who have found the part they are to play; who are doing the work for which they are endowed; who are satisfied that they are filling a vital need; who are meeting their obligations and standing up to their tasks.

Character is a positive thing. It is not protected innocence, but practised virtue; it is not disgust of vice, but love of excellence.

Character takes no account of what you are thought to be, but what you are. You have your own laws and court to judge you, and these persuade you to be what you would like to seem. Character is having an inner light and courage to follow its dictates. As Shakespeare put it: "...to thine own self be true,/ And it must follow, as the night the day,/ Thou canst not then be false to any man."

The practice of the good life is the very life of religion. Yet the religious manual of conduct of many a person or group almost always lags behind the current moral standards of a people. Church politics can be as destructive and hurting as in government, or elsewhere.

Persons who make no profession of religious faith sometimes achieve better character than those who do. Many who seldom, if ever, enter a church door often shame devout worshippers by the high ethical quality of their lives. This is not

only a disturbing fact, it is disastrous. All the great religions have enunciated principles of conduct and teach these principles. Failure to accept and live by these principles causes censure and condemnation to fall upon those who do this.

Everyone has the right to think and act and believe as they will, but also the responsibility to give an accounting sometime, somewhere, for what they choose to think, and believe, and do. There are hundreds of things in this world which are right but can't be legislated for; things that will never be done unless someone is prepared to do them for no reward except their integrity to principle and the feeling that they are contributing what they expect of themselves. Conventional followers of a religion usually fail to produce such character and integrity. Though they may be professing Christians, for example, they can be dominated by personal animosities, social snobbery, and delight in critical and sometimes slanderous gossip

(Character, cont'd)

concerning their fellow Christians, racial enmities, and long range oppression of others in their power.

ON BUILDING CHARACTER

One thing I have observed is that everyone's life is spent in the pursuit of self-fulfillment, but not everyone reaches their objective. The person who succeeds is a person who has realized in time that satisfaction does not come merely from being good at something, but also from being a certain kind of person.

Recently I was invited to give leadership in a discussion on "Doing Justice." in a group of 30 persons composed of Baptist and United Church people from neighbouring congregations in the community. A very intense and thoughtful discussion took place. Of particular interest to me was that the two and a half hours was spent defining their understanding of "justice" and they never got to the work of justice. This was fine because when one understands justice and has justice in ones heart that person will do justice. And justice can only be done or expressed because it is a virtue, a general moral goodness which results in right thinking and action.

Seven cardinal virtues were listed by early Christian writers who added to the four virtues of Plato and the Stoics (prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice) three "theological virtues" (faith, hope, and love).

REAL, NOT ASSUMED

A person of character endeavours to be really what he or she wishes to appear. Character deals with substance, not show. It is complexion, not cosmetic: the outward expression of an inner reality, not something stuck on from outside.

Good character cannot be developed overnight. It is built over a period of time. It involves observation, reasoning and study. It entails imagination, experiment, and action.

I remember years ago when I was team teaching in the primary department of a church school a teacher asking when the teaching session would begin. My reply was when the first child enters the door. The demeanor of those who greet the child, the help given to the child, the atmosphere of the teachers and the room, all contributed to the success or failure of the session as far as learning character was concerned for the child.

PROPORTIONAL GROWTH

Knowledge, emotion, conscience, will, and action, each and all are necessary to growing to full stature in character. Religion embraces a knowledge of divine things, of the highest truths, and experiencing the eternal reality of life.

The early Christian church manual the Second Letter of Peter instructs Christians to "try your hardest to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with fortitude, fortitude with piety, piety with mutual kindness, and mutual kindness with love." (2 Peter 1:5-7).

These verses treat of the growth of Christian character and of its ingredients. They speak of moral strength, which enables one to do what one knows to be right; of spiritual discernment; of self-control, by which one resists temptation; fortitude, by which one bears up under persecution or

(Ladder of Virtues, cont'd)

adversity; right feeling and behaviour towards what is holy, and towards others. The word for love used here is the Greek word *agape* which is the New Testament word for love at its excellence. This brings character to its highest level.

Love is an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love. As our faith deepens, so does our capacity to understand and experience love in all its reality.

THE CHANGING FACE OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity exists in a world that is radically new. Revolutionary change is the changeless fact confronting all human life and every institution. Christianity must be reborn else it will die as it faces new knowledge, new mores, and the demand for spiritual ministry.

At the present many Christians are retreating, retrenching their organization, the church, into institutional busyness. A ministry aiming at homogenized individualism, piety, or emotional security completes the escapism.

The pioneers of the new Christianity remain loyal to the incarnation, the knowledge that God as love and healer is exemplified in the narratives of Jesus and the teachings of the New Testament. The realm of God is within us and among us. Authentic Christianity is not the result of religious salespersonship or programming. It is a dynamism, a quality of inner being, and a style of existence in the world. Authentic Christian life is "strength and power...in...inner being." (Ephesians 3:16).

The changing face of Christianity may be exemplified in part by the function today of prison chaplains.

Though locked away, pretty much out of sight, and even more out of mind, they illustrate the ministry of the future.

Able ministers in their own particular faith, through their specialized training and out of necessity they are leaders in multifaith ministries of pastoral and religious care. In the captive community of the prison and jail the chaplain serves all people of all faiths, even those without a faith connection.

Proficient in their own faith messages and rituals today's chaplain utilizes the services of other ministers, priests, rabbis, elders, imans, and volunteers. This is done by developing a network of associations with the religious leaders and workers available outside the prison in the surrounding communities.

As well, prison chaplains arrange and supervise volunteer religious programmes, utilizing the faith groups available and interested in serving the prisoners spiritual needs.

These contacts with the world outside the prison confines are valuable in helping the prisoners to make the transition from captivity to normal life in the community again.

The church in the future may well be more multifaith in character. The growing generation has less interest in doctrines, dogmas, even membership in a particular faith group, and favour relationships that foster spiritual and religious development. They are generally disinterested in organized religion and seek niches of interest and need. They are used to networking and learn and participate widely in the networks available to them.

Christianity must break out of the isolation of congregationalism

(More Ecumenical Church, cont'd)

with segregated community lines of class, culture, income, ethnic group, and become more ecumenical, sharing with the rest of the world their witness of the works of God, and the "local" church be understood in such a way that it refers to all the people of God in their locality in the full sense.

A world in transition, a new listening to that world, a new message to meet its needs, these form the evangelistic situation of today.

Cast off the old and declare nothing you do not mean. We must pour new wine into new wineskins.

GOD'S PRISON PARAMEDICS

Despite the job's emotional costs, our jail and prison chaplains continue a faithful and needed ministry. Sometimes they have been called spiritual paramedics

Trained and chosen to provide spiritual and religious care for prisoners and staff in our prisons and detention centres, the chaplains provide a varied ministry under precarious, even dangerous conditions. When I was the United Church chaplain at the Guelph Correctional Centre I got caught in a prison riot. I was locked alone in a concrete corridor for 5 hours, listening to the mayhem going on around me. Eventually as the correctional officers subdued the riot they got to me and escorted me to the "tower," where I had to wait several more hours until a count was done. I observed prisoners being dragged in irons by officers, literally thrown into cells, and when the cells in that wing were full the large iron handle pulled down which levered a steel rod through all the doors making them incapable of being opened. This was a much rougher sight than anything I

had ever experienced on the farm with animals in my youth. Needless to say there was considerable counselling needed after the affair died down.

The prison chaplains' role demands giving spiritual assistance to the diverse community of prisoners and keepers, locked together in a centre of punishment, penance, and compensation.

It has been said that the wheels of justice grind slowly. What they grind are human beings. Our system of imprisonment grinds away the humanity of the victims who get caught in its jaws.

Anti-social behaviour most often stems from deep wounds in people who are victims of emotional deprivation, child abuse, and poverty.

In her book, "Still Barred From Prison," Claire Culhane identifies who makes up the greater part of our prison population: the young (Canada imprisons more young people than any other country in the world), the poor, minority groups, and the unemployed.

Chaplains play an important role in the creating of justice by listening, giving, and forgiving. In the restricted, closed prison community the chaplain listens and asks to be listened to. Whether aggressive or shy, the prisoner needs to be involved in mutual listening and understanding.

Find out who your nearest chaplain is and give moral support. Take your chaplain out for lunch and get involved as a volunteer in the prison's programme of spiritual care.

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