GETTING ORIENTED

Pilgrim Church, Duluth September 8, 1974 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is..." Galatians 5:22

There are three basic ways in which people foul up the Christian religion.

The first way we may call moralistic. From the moralistic point of view the Christian religion is exhausted by doing certain proper things and by not doing certain improper things.

Characteristically people who take a moralistic view of Christian character tend to think in rather negative terms. We have all met the lady who recommends her son-in-law along such lines as this:

> "Harry's a good Christian husband for my daughter. He doesn't smoke, he doesn't drink, he doesn't play cards."

But a moralistic outlook may be expressed in positive terms too. Every minister has met many times over that fellow who tells us why he doesn't need to go to church. Typically his little sermonette to the pastor goes like this:

> "The trouble with most people who go to church is that they think they are better than other people. They're too smug. Now as far as I'm concerned, I keep the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. So what do I need to go to church for?

Now the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule are inspired guidelines for human behavior. I always feel my spirits boosted when I meet one of these people who follows such guidelines so faithfully. Such an encounter really sets me up for the rest of the day.

But sometimes the suspicion creeps over me that something is lacking. There is something that these moralistic people do not see.

They do not see the point so often stressed by Jesus that it is not only the outward act, but the inward attitude that matters in the way we live out the commandments.

They do not see that a Christian life involves not just this or that good deed, but a whole way of relating to life that is grounded in an at-one-ness with God through faith and love.

They do not see how persistently we all deceive ourselves, how easily we fall into a self-righteous appraisal of our own virtue. They miss the truth of the old medieval metaphor of the human soul being like an onion. You keep peeling away at it, but no matter how much you peel away it still smells of its own self-centeredness.

The moralistic outlook does not grasp the biblical message that in the sight of God no person is justified, or if it does grasp that message, it does so with despair. For the moralistic outlook bases its hope on our own ability to prove to God how proper we are. It does not hear the good news that as Christians we gather together in church to celebrate a love that forgives us and renews us despite our imperfections.

Christianity is an ethical religion. It asks the question, "what does the Lord require of us?" It calls us to seek the righteousness of the Kingdom. It challenges us to achieve a goodness higher than that of the Pharisees.

But a moralistic outlook distorts this ethical side of Christianity. It puts the emphasis not on God's gracious action in human life, but on our own behavior. Usually the moralistic attitude grows very narrow and very petty and ends up overlooking what Jesus called "the weighty matters of the law." Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians primarily to combat a moralistic tendency within the early churches.

So then when we find Paul speaking of "love," and "joy" and "self-control" it is essential that we recognize that he is not just throwing one more list of moralistic virtues at us. He is describing qualities of life that emerge when we enter into a life-changing relationship with the divine Spirit. The point of departure is not with us, but with God.

A second way of fouling up the Christian religion may be termed intellectualistic.

Now I do not wish to play down the intellectual side of Christian living any more than I wish to downgrade the moral side. Christianity does involve a way of looking at life. It contains a certain vision of the world. There are important things for a Christian to know if he is to understand the meaning of his faith and the heritage of which he is a part. Moreover, in times like these we need to exercise our minds strenuously in trying to relate our Christian convictions to the complex issues of the day.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists, brought a new warmth and fervor to the religious life of his day. Yet Wesley was also a man of great learning and intellectual power. Once Wesley received a letter from a man declaring:

> "The Lord has directed me to write you and tell you while you know both Greek and Hebrew, he can do without book larnin'."

Wesley wrote back:

> "Your letter received, and I may say it was superfluous, as I already know the Lord could do without my larnin'...while the Lord did not direct me to tell you, yet I wish to say...on my own responsibility that the Lord does not need your ignorance either."

In our time too there is much shallow anti-intellectualism in the church. I think that the Lord always can do without that.

But he also can do without an intellectualistic distortion of Christianity. When I was in college a great many people were very fond of reading Kierkegaard and describing very pompously their existential predicament and the need for a leap of faith. Learned theologians became popular and people loved to quote their jaberwocky. The press was full of articles about the "return to religion of the intellectuals." Indeed, a number of artists and writers did seem to rediscover aspects of the Christian message. Yet too often, I think, people were just playing around with symbols and ideas. They delighted too much in their own thinking processes and not enough in that unsearchable wisdom that comes from beyond ourselves.

Sometimes we may get the notion that if we could just read one more book about religion we would find our soul's salvation. But nobody is saved by books. In another place Paul wrote:

"If I understand all mysteries and have all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing."

At its heart, Christianity is a grounding of life in the love that the divine Spirit sheds in our hearts. Where that foundation is lacking, it matters little how much we polish up the little grey cells.

The third way of fouling up the Christian religion is emotionalistic.

Once again, let's not miss the point. I am not speaking against emotion. Nothing is more unbelievable than a passionless faith. The author of the Apocalypse tells us that God finds lukewarm Christians especially distasteful.

Today there is a very legitimate concern to bring the expression of feeling back into the church. For too long the church has proved rather dry and colorless. We have cultivated a sort of antiseptic atmosphere in which profound passion is exterminated in the interests of decorum and complacency.

But the legitimate place of emotion may be distorted too. True religion is always experiential. We cannot speak authentically about the presence of God unless we experience that presence ourselves. On the other hand, you do not generate a genuine religious experience just by stirring up people's feelings.

At the moment there is a widespread stress in our culture on people feeling free to express their feelings. I think there is value in this stress in certain contexts. But I think this new emphasis may be misguided too. For example, there is the tendency to assume rather naively that people are capable at all times of communicating how they feel, and that when they do communicate we are hearing the gospel truth from them. Especially we tend to assume this when people communicate in rather loud and emotionalistic ways. But I am not sure that this vaunted "openness" is quite so easy to come by.

Again, I have observed that when people are engaged in some absorbing task, they rarely bother with how they feel. Ask an athlete in the middle of a game how he feels, that is, to say, what kind of emotional state he is in, and I think in most cases he will be at a loss for an answer. He is not thinking about his feelings. He is concentrating on scoring points.

There is nothing in the life or message of Jesus that encourages an endless preoccupation with our own feelings. Indeed, it is noteworthy that unlike so many wisemen of today, Jesus rarely talked about his own feelings. Scoring points in discipleship was what mattered, not sitting around talking about your state of mind.

One of the troubles with the church today is that people get the idea that they should only worship when they feel like it. I believe that the most dedicated Christians in all ages have worshiped frequently when they did not feel like it. This is not to say that they worshiped insincerely. But they worshiped out of a deep commitment that did not depend on whether or not they had their morning cup of coffee.

There is no genuine Christian faith without feeling. But feeling is a by-product of faith, not the objective The peculiar American heresy has always been to try to live by the doctrine of "salvation by feeling." But once again that is centering our hope not in God but in ourselves.

That is the feature which all these distortions of the Christian religion have in common, the moralistic, the intellectualistic and the emotionalistic. They all base their approach to religion on how we are. The focus is on ourselves, our attainments and our abilities. But the whole thrust of Christianity is that we are challenged to orient our lives toward a power beyond ourselves. It is a life centered in the Spirit.

What does it mean to live by the Spirit? Today we hear many answers. But one of the best answers we can find is in the fifth chapter of the letter to the Galatians. I don't know when you last read Galatians. It was probably about the same time that you last read Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript, from which Iread to you this morning. Galatians is a rather tiresome book. But here is a beautiful line:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

I invite you to think about these fruits with me in the weeks ahead, to think about them not in a moralistic way, but as qualities that arise in us when we live lives enabled and inspired by a power greater than ourselves.