



S4.E2. The Normal Christian Life "Part 1 of Setting the Vision"

Introduction

About 50 years ago, when I was quite young in the faith, I came across a book written by Watchman Nee entitled, "The Normal Christian Life." I was totally overwhelmed and amazed by the fact that what we may "think" is a normal life for a Christian is not at all normal, especially when compared to Biblical, New Testament, standards.

It seems that on the one hand there is the church that has "evolved" over the years, that has become more sophisticated and formal, and today it is a center for the Christian "religion." Many would describe this church as a good church with a good pastor, good worship and good caring people, perhaps family and community minded. I am reminded of an old saying, "The good is the enemy of the best" meaning that settling for something that is simply "good" and seemingly safe and comfortable can prevent you from striving for something higher, or the "best." In regards to our faith, it implies that complacency, combined with mediocrity, can be a hindrance from pressing on to greater revelation and life in Christ; to a place where spiritual understanding dispels complacent behavior.

On the other hand, according to New Testament writings, there exists a dynamic spiritual Church, initiated by the Holy Spirit at the resurrection and ascension of Christ, in which believers are being transformed by the inward workings of the Holy Spirit. This is a church operating outside the bounds and limitations of religion. Once I thought being "religious" was good, honorable and respected. But then I began to see that "religion" itself is but a system of faith and worship, an organized framework of teachings, commandments, rituals, holy days, and so on, practiced routinely. Thus, religion is imposed from the outside with the intent to conform to certain standards; whereas the New Testament church offers in its place, simply spiritual life that is inwardly imparted by the Holy Spirit as an altogether new spontaneous life. The term "Christianity" is thus a two-sided coin; on the one side it means a religion to believe and follow; on the other side it is a spiritual life born within and grows up in relationship to God; the first is formal, organized, and static; the latter is spontaneous, free flowing, and dynamic.

And so today we'll press forward in seeking to understand the principle of the truly "normal" Christian life and set forth a vision to press towards.

Setting the Vision

We'll begin with "Setting the Vision"-- for it is important to set our focus to have an idea of what lies ahead. As anyone who has used a compass in the outdoors knows, to walk in a true direction you must pick a point or an object on the horizon to which the compass is pointing, and then walk towards that object keeping it in sight. If that object is a hilltop many miles away, I no longer need the compass for now, but only need to press on keeping the hilltop in direct sight. Spiritually, in setting the vision, it is establishing the distant endpoint of our pursuit of God, setting the end goal. It is as written in Habakkuk 2.2-3,

*“Write the vision, and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it. **3**For the vision is yet for an appointed time; But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; Because it will surely come, It will not tarry.”*

Let's begin by reading a scripture passage from Ephesians 4.11-16. This is a very important passage, for it will set the tone for not only this message, but for all the podcasts to follow; it involves “setting the vision.” As vision in the natural is necessary to see what is before us, and what is far off, vision in the spiritual realm is equally necessary to see what is before us in God's plan of salvation and what is the nature of His end purpose for His creation. We'll read the whole passage first and then return to each verse for a more detailed discussion. (All scriptures used are from the New King James (NKJ) version of the Bible)

“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”
Eph. 4.11-16

This passage is a lot to take in; there is so much Divine truth in it to discover. I refer to this passage often in my writing because it is so central to the function and purpose of the Church. What we must do is to take it one verse at a time, study each verse, asking God to speak to us, give us understanding. This is the true nature of Bible reading, not as an object of memorization but as a conversation with God.

Verse 11. *And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,*

Let us begin with the understanding that these five ministries noted were not only for the first century church, but were initiated then to continue to guide the church over its lifetime...even to this day; they continue to have a purpose and function on today's Church. It is important to realize this, to expect it and look for it in the Church. In this verse we are to understand two important thoughts regarding all ministries. The first is that God “sets” specific *ministries* into the Church just as He pleases, as written in 1 Cor. 12.18, “*But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased*” — it reads “*just as ‘He’ pleased,*” O' how man over time has usurped His authority and appointed men and women to positions in the Church as “they” see fit. Prayer and patience must be allowed for God to work His will.

The second thought is that though these five ministries are important, they certainly do not exhaust the list of ministries we are to find in the Church— far from it. If the heart stops beating, the body will certainly die; it is absolutely necessary for the life of the Body. If a tiny blood vessel carrying the vital flow of blood to the brain should burst, as in an aneurysm, the body may also die, or at the minimum

become impaired. Thus the smallest, most insignificant seeming ministry is of vast importance to the functioning of the Church. 1 Cor. 12.14-18 reinforces this view,

“For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.”

And so, the Church, as the Body of Christ, should be thought of as a many-membered body, each member supplying a particular need; from great to small; they are all important. The importance of an apostle cannot be overstated, nor the importance of an intercessor who remains in faithful prayer, or the worshipper who presses into the courts of God, or the encourager who visits in a time of need to help restore a soul in distress. The function and ministries to the Body are many and varied, yet **all** are necessary. You are important. This next verse in our passage reads,

Verse 12. for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Jesus proclaimed in Mt. 16.18, *“I will build My church...”* Why, and for what purpose, is this church? In this verse of scripture three individual distinct thoughts combine to form a single vision for the Church: they are, 1) *for the equipping of the saints*, 2) *for the work of ministry*, and 3) *for the edifying of the body of Christ*. Do you see that something dynamic is happening within the environment of this church? Life is happening. There is a Divine purpose for its existence, a purpose above and beyond the mere thought of man hoping for heaven, and certainly higher than the religious activities of many churches today.

Note the actions: *equipping*, *working*, and *edifying*. There is a spiritual work, something is happening, souls are being transformed, growth is occurring, a holy dwelling place for God is being built; the Church is functioning not as an organization but as a living organism. Things are coming together, something of oneness or a union is being formed. Jesus said, *“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”* He is the binding force causing a union and oneness among its many members. Christ is the head of this many membered body, directing it towards His end-time purposes.

If the Kingdom of God is found anywhere on the earth, it is only found in the Church. It is unlike any other realm or kingdom. The Kingdom of God first appeared in the earth with the person of Jesus Christ; now it is appearing in the Church as He is its Head and we being His Body. Today, there is no Kingdom of God on the earth outside of the Church. Let's look a little more closely at these three actions: 1) equipping, 2) working, and 3) edifying. These are very important spiritual concepts, for they comprise the work of the Church.

1) For the equipping of the saints. Another word for *equipping* is for perfecting or the *maturing* of the saints. This is the all-inclusive and great objective of our Lord, the perfecting, or spiritual *maturing* of all believers. Many misunderstand the Great Commission, they think only of evangelizing and baptizing, but in Mt. 28.19-20. the Lord commissions His disciples to, *“Go therefore and ‘make disciples’ of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;”* The word here

is not to teach, but to “**make disciples.**” Making disciples involves teaching but also means to be brought into spiritual union with Christ and His purposes; it is to be made aware of our oneness in Christ.

None are to be left as newborn babes, or as children, unstable and easily influenced by the world and by the evil one who oversees it. From the day of salvation until we breathe our last breath, there is a process at work “in us.” It is written in 2 Cor. 3.18,

*“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, **are being transformed** into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”*

Are being transformed—equipping is an ongoing process. It is one matter to cross the threshold entering into the Kingdom of God; it is quite another matter to experience the transformation of our souls in becoming spiritually mature individuals and learning to function in His Kingdom. Today, in the USA, the school systems are failing our children by substituting warped social programs for hard academics. They are becoming institutions of indoctrination rather than education. In like manner, our churches are failing its people by substituting its own brand of social programming for Biblical truth and spiritual reality. By social programming I mean becoming broad minded with regards to the world, being tolerant of sin, acceptable of deviant lifestyles, distorting the Godly understanding of love, and emphasizing good works, any kind of good works as long as the world judges it as being good. This is indoctrination into a liberal lifestyle.

Biblical truth is spiritual reality, and by that I mean we must receive the holy scriptures as the word of God Himself speaking to us today. Just as it is written in 1 Thes. 2.13,

*“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, **the word of God, which effectually works also in you that believe.**”*

“the word of God, which effectually works also in you” The Kingdom of God is not a natural realm but a spiritual...how else can “*the word of God effectively work in you*”...think on that, the word of God, as a spiritual energy, working in you to the transforming of your soul. How powerful is this promise. The next function of the Church is...

2) For the work of ministry. Unto each and every believer is given a gift of grace, called a ministry, or a service. Each ministry is designed for the mutual benefit of all in the Church. To be reminded of this again is very, very important. Except for the work of evangelism, the primary focus of the Church is on the Church itself, for its care, nurture, protection and maturity. Remember this, evangelical ministries may focus on the lost souls in this world, but the primary ministry of the church is towards church itself, the saints comprising the Body of Christ. The Church is the child of God that needs nurturing and upbringing. The society in which we live is not a part of the Church. We may have obligations to society, but do not confuse these social obligations with those due to the Church. It must also be noted that this ministry is a spiritual gifting and not necessarily a natural talent. There is a distinction between the natural and the spiritual. A *talent* is a natural aptitude or skill; a *gifting* is a spiritually imparted ability to do something, a spiritual work that brings spiritual results.

We are by nature one way, but by spiritual impartation yet another way. Care must be taken that talent alone, without proper spiritual guidance, may actually be damaging to the Church by shifting its

focus from things of the spirit to that of the natural. Take for example worship; worship can easily degrade from a time of true spiritual worship to a secular rendition of songs and music designed to display talents and to touch the emotions. It is never a matter of what we "feel" is good to do; but obedience to the spirit is the right thing to do which arises from the inward man, not the outward.

A ministry is a *service* willingly rendered to the Church, and if a service, one must be acting as a *servant*, even as Christ Himself was a servant, as Jesus spoke of Himself in Mt. 20.28: "*just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*" It is written elsewhere: "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,*" Phil. 2.5 it is action without any intent for personal gain. Actually, the personal cost may be quite heavy in terms of time, expense, and personal sacrifice.

I believe the word "engaged" is appropriate here. We must all, each and every member of the Body of Christ, become actively engaged in the work of ministry, and not, as in some cases, on the one side is a pastor who does it all, and on the other side is the congregant who sits in a pew and lets him. Just attending church is not being engaged. Briefly, take for example the following from Gal. 6.1:

"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."

Just who is to come into ministry here? The pastor? Sunday school teacher? The truth is here stated, "***you who are spiritual.***" It becomes a personal engagement.

And the final work of ministry, 3) ***For the edifying (or building up) of the Body of Christ.*** The focus now shifts from the individual believer to the Church as a whole, the grand objective of building up the Church to function as a unified Body of Christ with Christ Himself as the Head, and every member a functioning part. The great objective of the Church is not the great accumulation of numbers, elaborate buildings as places of worship, humanitarian efforts here and abroad, or social programs. No, the great objective is for the Church to be built up spiritually, with an aptitude of Godly righteousness and holiness. The Church must rightly become a habitation of God in the Spirit.

To say that the Church must be a *holy* dwelling place for God means that it is to be different from anything else found on this earth. The gathering must never be desecrated by sin or wickedness or even made common or worldly in any way, or worldly practices and methodologies brought into the church. It is separate from the world, altogether different. Just listen to the words from Ephesians 2.21-22.

*"in whom (Christ) the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a **dwelling place of God in the Spirit.**"*

What an awesome revelation. The Body of Christ is a *holy temple, a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.* In the world there is sin and darkness and the carnal efforts of man; in the Church there is holiness and light and the persuasion of the Holy Spirit. The Church must always be a safe place to gather together without fear of evil or wicked influences. It must always be a trusted place to bring our children and for those young in the faith, who are impressionable. It is a place of repentance from dead works and of drawing close to God.

The Church is not now, nor ever will be, a hospital for the morally sick, for those wanting some kind of redemption but without repentance. Rather, to all these, the Church is a morgue, a place of death to an old life, and the birth chamber of an altogether new life in Christ. It is a holy environment, a seedbed for holy character, a place of restoration, and a place for spiritual growth and maturity.

Of course the Church is not a building as many presume, but is actually the gathering together of redeemed souls; it is a place of unity, of oneness, a place of a kindred spirit. Note the following scripture from Eph. 4.4-6: *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* Eph. 4.4-6 There is “oneness” in the Church of all spiritual things; there is no room for other Gods, no ecumenism with other religions, no tolerance for another Gospel, no adopting worldly standards. The verse ends by speaking of the majesty of the only God and Father *“who is over all and in all”...in all who are the Church!* O’ how we must realize that believers are *temples of the same Holy Spirit,* (1 Cor. 6.19) and it is the *same spirit that raised Christ from the dead is living in us..* (Rm. 8.11)

In a physical church building all the congregants, young or old, black or white, highly educated or uneducated, all breathe the same air that fills the building. The air that is in the building also fills the lungs of each person doing its work in sustaining the body, bringing oxygen to the blood and life to the body. In like manner, though spiritually, it is written that in Eph. 2.21-22, *“21In Him the whole building is fitted together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22And in Him you too are being built together into a dwelling place for God in His Spirit.”* It is the same Spirit that fills the whole of the gathering of believers that fills each and every saint gathered together.

We must receive the reality of this by faith and act accordingly. This is *truth* that must be acknowledged and embraced into our lives. The word faith may be a noun, static, as a religion; but Biblical faith is a verb, meaning an action...to believe, faith as believing is action.

Furthermore, regarding unity in the Body, it is written in Gal. 3.28, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* It is shameful to consider one individual higher or greater, more honored or less honored, accepted or rejected by any other standard than simply whether they are in Christ or not in Christ. Wealth, education, social status, race, gender, nationality, and all those things the world uses to separate and categorize people have no place in the Body of Christ. Oneness must prevail.

The grand conclusion of verse 4.12 is the clear **objective for all ministries**; and that is for the *edifying (or building up) the Body of Christ.* This is its goal, its grand objective. Peter puts it this way,

“But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.” 1 Pet. 5.10

I would that these four dynamic actions be imparted into my soul so deeply that they become a driving force of all ministry, of all that I do. We are *“perfected”* when we mature and not just come into an increased knowledge of Christ but come into a living union with Him; we are *“established”* when we are immovable, firmly planted, and are not shaken with circumstances, so that nothing can overthrow our faith or our hope of what is to come, or dampen our love for God and one another; we are *“strengthened”* when we advance the Kingdom of God, defeating the kingdom of darkness, enlarging God’s kingdom in our lives and upon the earth; and we are *“settled”* when we become as a

house built upon a solid rock foundation and have found that joy and rest for our souls. These are the objectives for all ministries, all services on the Body of Christ: to *perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle* one another in love. Finally,

Verse 13. *till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;*

This verse lies at the heart of this passage and this message; it presents the grand purpose, the eternal reason for the workings of all the ministries and services of all its members; it sets forth vision, establishes the goal; it defines the very destiny of the Church...and that high calling, which is, once again, spiritual maturity...maturity towards the *measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*. Christ is the standard; He is the measure to be reached; we are to grow towards the likeness of Christ. Realistically, in this lifetime, one can never attain the fullness of that marvelous stature, but that does not negate our daily transformation, for this is what pleases the Father.

Care must be taken to understand the principle of growth. Spiritual growth has less to do with things like *behavior modification* and developing *self-determination* or being *resolute* than it has to do with the *resurrection of a new life* from within. Scriptures like (2 Cor. 5.17) "*we are a new creation in Christ, old things have passed behold all things have become new,*" come to mind. But the single-most of all scripture, the verse that has the power to fix our attention on the spiritual nature of our high calling in Christ is Gal. 2.20 . As we read this verse note how it speaks in the first person, "I" and "me:"

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." Gal. 2.20

This speaks of the Spirit of Christ who is in you, not above you or around you, but in you, inside your heart. And of this Jesus said, "*He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.*" Jn. 7.38 Our lives become the outflow of His divine nature.

We will continue next time with the remaining three verses from our passage: Ephesians 4.14-16.

S4.E2. Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think lies at the heart of a "Normal Christian Church?"
2. Why is "Setting a Vision" important? Why is it relevant?
3. Explain major and minor ministries. Give examples. Compare these ministries to the human body.
4. What is the major function and purpose of all ministries; what is the end goal for the Church?
5. Explain Eph. 4.13 "*till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;*"

