

1. What do you think of John Calvin's understanding of human ruin and deliverance? (See paragraphs 2 through 4 of this chapter.)
2. What do you believe Jesus means when he speaks of the necessity of *losing* our soul or life and finding it again in him? (As with most of these "thought" questions, try to be as concrete and practical as possible in responding.)
3. Why can I not be Jesus' apprentice (disciple) if I do not take my cross and follow him?
4. What is it to "count the costs"? What are the gains as well as expenses?
5. Does St. Francis's teaching about *perfect joy* apply to you? Imagine some ways it might apply (what might actually happen) in your real-world context.
6. Why is *giving* so central to the restoration of the soul? How does giving depend on the reality of the kingdom?
7. Is being "dead to self" a realistic goal of growth in Christ? Is it the same as being nothing? Is it "healthy"?
8. How would you describe one who is dead to self—again, in real-life, practical terms?
9. Can *we* avoid *egotism* (pride of will) in standing for what is right and good? How would we do that—beyond anger?

CHAPTER
5

SPIRITUAL CHANGE

The Reliable Pattern

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 from the Lord, the Spirit.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

We have looked, now, at the basic dimensions of the human self and at the central principle of its dysfunctionality and corruption (that is, self-worship), as well as at the foundation of its renovation (that is, self-denial). Spiritual formation in Christ is the process by which one moves and is moved from self-worship to Christ-centered self-denial as a general condition of life in God's present and eternal kingdom.

The next logical step in a practical treatment of spiritual formation might seem to be the provision of detailed instructions on how to move from a life of self-adulation to one of self-denial, dealing with each of the dimensions of the human being in turn. And we plan to do just that. But *before* it can be effectively done in our contemporary context, we must clear up a few more preliminary matters.

TRANSFORMATION INTO CHRISTLIKENESS IS POSSIBLE

FIRST OF ALL, WE must be clear that such a transition as is envisioned in Christian spiritual formation can actually happen, and can actually happen to *us*. This, today, is not obvious.

What we see around us today of the “usual” Christian life could easily make us think that spiritual transformation is simply impossible. It is now common for Christian leaders themselves to complain about how little real-life difference there is between professing, or even actual Christians, on the one hand, and nonChristians on the other. Although there is much talk about “changing lives” in Christian circles, the reality is very rare, and certainly much less common than the talk.

The “failures” of prominent Christian leaders themselves, already referred to, might cause us to think genuine spiritual formation in Christlikeness to be impossible for “real human beings.” How is it, exactly, that a man or woman can respectably serve Christ for many years and then morally disintegrate? And the failures that become known are few compared to the ones that remain relatively unknown and are even accepted among Christians.

Recently, I learned that one of the most prominent leaders in an important segment of Christian life “blew up,” became uncontrollably angry, when someone questioned him about the quality of his work. This was embarrassing, but it is accepted (if not acceptable) behavior; and in this case, it was the one who was questioning him who was chastised. That is in fact a familiar pattern in both Christian and nonChristian “power structures.” But what are we to say about the spiri-

tual formation of that leader? Has something been omitted? Or is he really the best we can do?

The same questions arise with reference to lay figures in areas of life such as politics, business, entertainment, or education, who show the same failures of character while openly identifying themselves as Christians. It is unpleasant to dwell on such cases, but they must be squarely faced.

Of course the effects of such failures depend on the circumstances, on how widely the failure becomes known, and on various other factors. In another case a pastor became enraged at something a subordinate did during a Sunday morning service. Immediately after the service he found that subordinate and gave him a merciless tongue-lashing. With his lapel mike still on! His diatribe was broadcast over the entire church plant and campus—in all the Sunday school rooms and the parking lot. Soon thereafter he “received the Lord’s call” to another church. But what about the spiritual formation of this leader? Is that the best we can do? And is he not still really like *that* in his new position?

Malfeasance with money is less acceptable than anger, and sexual misconduct is less tolerated still. But is the inner condition (the heart) all that different in these cases—before God?

The sad thing when a leader (or any individual) “fails” is not just what he or she *did*, but the heart and life and whole person who is revealed by the act. What is sad is who these leaders have been *all along*, what their inner life has been like, and no doubt also how they have suffered during all the years before they “did it” or were found out. What kind of persons have they been, and what, really, has been their relation to God?

Real spiritual need and change, as we have emphasized, is on the inside, in the hidden area of the life that God sees and that we cannot even see in ourselves without his help. Indeed, in the early stages of spiritual development we could not endure seeing our inner life as it really is. The possibility of denial and self-deception is something God has made accessible to us, in part to protect us until we begin to seek him. Like the face of the mythical Medusa, our true condition away from God would turn us to stone if we ever fully confronted it. It would drive us mad. He has to help us come to terms with it in ways that will not destroy us outright.

Without the gentle though rigorous process of inner transformation, initiated and sustained by the graceful presence of God in our world and in our soul, the change of personality and life clearly announced and spelled out in the Bible, and explained and illustrated throughout Christian history, is impossible. We not only admit it, but also insist upon it. But on the other hand, the result of the effort to change our behavior *without* inner transformation is precisely what we see in the current shallowness of Western Christianity that is so widely lamented and in the notorious failures of Christian leaders.

“MISERABLE SINNER” CHRISTIANITY

BUT WE MUST ALSO recognize a second factor that leads many to think that spiritual formation to Christlikeness is impossible. This is the widely held view that the low level of spiritual living among professing Christians is to be regarded as “only natural,” only what is to be expected—lamentable as that may be. According to this view, human nature, flesh, life, and

its world are all essentially vile, rotten, and worthless, and *especially* on the inside. Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Hitler, as examples, were equally vile in their hearts, this view would say. But for various constraints from God and the situation in which God had placed her, Mother Teresa could have behaved just as wickedly throughout her life as Hitler did.

This outlook, which has sometimes been referred to as “miserable sinner” Christianity, feeds on a number of misunderstandings. One is that the ungodly condition of the human heart and life described in the Bible (recall the references in [chapter 2](#)) is essential to human beings *as such*, and therefore remains true until we pass from this life and take a new form. (That of angels, perhaps. See Luke 20:36.) This account of things often associates wickedness with the body—that dripping, dirty, lustful thing—and holiness, therefore, with getting rid of the body. Fortunately, a careful study of the biblical sources makes it clear that such a view of the body is false. Here we can say little more than that.¹

Another misunderstanding is that, unless the “miserable sinner” account were true, we might rise to a position where we could deal with God on the basis of merit. To fend off any appearance of self-righteousness you will sometimes hear the greatest of Christians saying things like, “I’m just as wicked as anyone else.” Was not the apostle Paul saying, long after his conversion, that he was the leading sinner among sinners (1 Timothy 1:15)?

But on the other hand, one can hardly imagine that Paul, at the time he wrote these words, was still the same person inwardly, full of rage and self-importance, that he was when caught up in the persecution of Christ through his people. Such a person does not write words like those in Philipians

3:7-14 or 4:4-9. And he does not say, as he did to the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1, NRSV), nor admonish others to “flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

NEVER “THERE” YET

BUT NO DOUBT THE later Paul who wrote these words was very sure that whatever spiritual formation in Christlikeness he had received might be overwhelmed. There remained in him a spark of evil that could be fanned into a flame were he not watchful or if God did not continuously direct and uphold him in every dimension of his nature.

He knew he was running a race, as you and I are. That race will not be over until we pass into God’s full world. No doubt Paul had in his lifetime seen many falter and fail, many who would not be able to say at the end, as he did, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

The image of the athlete was strong and ever-present in Paul’s world and in his own mind. He knew that you had to keep yourself in spiritual shape to *finish* and finish well. In 1 Corinthians 9 he discussed how he therefore conducted himself in his course of life, how he exercised and treated his body severely, making it his slave (not he its slave), “lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified” (9:27).

The valid point in “miserable sinner” Christianity is correctly expressed in these well-chosen words by St. Augustine:

If anyone supposes that with man, living, as he still does, in this mortal life, it may be possible for him to dispel and clear off every obscurity induced by corporeal and carnal fancies, and to attain to the serenest light of immutable truth, and to cleave constantly and unswervingly to this with a mind wholly estranged from the course of this present life, that man understands neither what he asks, nor who he is that is putting such a supposition. . . . If ever the soul is helped to reach beyond the cloud by which all the earth is covered (cf. Eccclus. xxiv, 6), that is to say, beyond this carnal darkness with which the whole terrestrial life is covered, it is simply as if he were touched with a swift coruscation, only to sink back into his natural infirmity, the desire surviving by which he may again be raised to the heights, but his purity being insufficient to establish him there. The more, however, anyone can do this, the greater is he; while the less he can do so the less is he.²

In the spiritual life one never rests on one’s laurels. It is a sure recipe for falling. Attainments are like the manna given to the Israelites in the desert, good only for the day (Exodus 16:4,20). Past attainments do not place us in a position of merit that permits us to let up in the hot pursuit of God for today, for now. Paul knew that, and he knew that others missed it or forgot it to their great harm.

We deserve nothing before God, no matter how far we have advanced, and we are never out of danger. As long as we are “at home in the body” (2 Corinthians 5:6), we are still just recovering sinners. And in these respects, though *only* in

these respects, do we remain “as wicked as anyone else”—Mother Teresa as Hitler.

But to distort this important truth into a claim that we can never really change, and especially in our hearts, is to substitute a glaring and harmful falsehood for a liberating and life-blessing truth. And that distortion, which sometimes is a true expression of genuine humility, can also be done by those who wish to take themselves off the hook, to enjoy remaining the same in their inner life. It is not easy to really want to be different.

AND WE ARE NEVER ON OUR OWN

AND THEN, FINALLY, THERE is a misunderstanding closely related to the one just discussed. This is the idea that the only alternative to “miserable sinner” Christianity is holding that human beings are somehow good apart from God and therefore capable of saving themselves, even saving themselves by merit.

The fear of many is that if you do not hold human beings to be, essentially and as such, “rotten,” and forever so, you are thereby committed to the view that they are, *as such*, essentially good and therefore righteous and meritorious. This is a field of battle fought over by Pelagius and Augustine many centuries ago and repeatedly revisited through Christian history. It involves many important issues, which cannot be fully dealt with here.

We must keep clear, however, that it is the *worth* of human beings, not their righteousness, which is tied to their nature. Things of great value can still be lost and often are; and to be of great value does not mean one is not lost, but is saved and

safe. “Depravity” does not, properly, refer to the inability to *act*, but to the unwillingness to act and clearly the inability to *earn*.

Everyone must be active in the process of their salvation and transformation to Christlikeness. This is an inescapable fact. But the *initiative* in the process is always God’s, and we would in fact do nothing without his initiative. However, that initiative is not something we are waiting upon. The ball is, as it were, in our court. God has invaded human history and reality. Jesus Christ has died on our behalf, is risen, and is now supervising events on earth toward an end that he will certainly bring to pass, to the glory of God. The issue now concerns what *we* will do. The idea that we can do nothing is an unfortunate confusion, and those who sponsor it never practice it, thank goodness.

If we—through well-directed and unrelenting action—effectually receive the grace of God in salvation and transformation, we certainly will be incrementally changed toward inward Christlikeness. The transformation of the outer life, especially of our behavior, will follow suit. That too is “an escapable fact.” “No good tree produces bad fruit” (Luke 6:43, PAR). But this means both goodness and ability in *union with* God, not apart from him—not independently, on our own.

The transformation of the inner being is as much or more a gift of grace as is our justification before God. Of course neither one is wholly passive. (To be forever lost you need only *do nothing*. Just stay your course.) But with reference to both justification and transformation, “boasting is excluded” by the law of grace through faith (Romans 3:27-31; Ephesians 2:1-10). In fact, we consume the most grace by leading a holy

life, in which we must be constantly upheld by grace, not by continuing to sin and being repeatedly forgiven. The interpretation of grace as having only to do with guilt is utterly false to biblical teaching and renders spiritual life in Christ unintelligible.

Hopefully, it will now be clear that our inner (and therefore outer) being can be transformed to increasingly take on the character of Christ. That transformation is not only *possible*, but has *actually* occurred to a significant degree in the lives of many human beings; and it is *necessary* if our life as a whole is to manifest his goodness and power, and if we as individuals are to grow into the eternal calling that God places upon each life.

THE GENERAL PATTERN OF PERSONAL GROWTH

BUT BEFORE TURNING TO the details of transformation in the various dimensions of the human being, we also need to understand *the general pattern* that *all* effective efforts toward personal transformation—not just Christian spiritual formation—must follow. Because we are active participants in the process and what we do or do not do makes a huge difference, our efforts must be based on understanding. The degree of success in such efforts will essentially depend upon the degree to which this general pattern is understood and intentionally conformed to.

So let us begin with a couple of easy illustrations and then spell out the pattern in its generality.

LEARNING TO SPEAK ARABIC

CONSIDER A CASE OF those who wish to speak a language they do not presently know, say French or Arabic or Japanese. In order to carry through with this simple case of (partial) personal transformation, they must have some idea of what it would be like to speak the language in question—of what their lives would then be like—and why this would be a desirable or valuable thing for them. They also need to have some idea of what must be done to learn to speak the language and why the price in time, energy, and money that must be expended constitutes a bargain, considering what they get in return. In the ideal case, all of this would be clearly before them and they would be gripped by the desirability of it.

Now, this is the *vision* that goes into the particular project of learning the language. Unless one has it—or, better, it has them—the language will pretty surely not be learned. The general absence of such a vision explains why language learning is generally so unsuccessful in educational programs in the United States. The presence of such a vision explains why, on the other hand, the English language is learned at a phenomenal rate all around the world. Multitudes see clearly the ways in which their life might be improved by knowledge of English. If the vision is clear and strong, it will very likely pull everything else required along with it; and the language (whichever it is) will be learned, even in difficult and distracting circumstances.

Still, more than vision is required, and especially there is required an *intention*. Projects of personal transformation rarely if ever succeed by accident, drift, or imposition. Indeed, where accident, drift, and imposition dominate—as they usually do, quite frankly, in the lives of professing Christians—

very little of any human value transpires. Effective action has to involve order, subordination, and progression, developing from the inside of the personality. It is, in other words, a spiritual matter, a matter of meaning and will, for we are spiritual beings. Conscious involvement with “order, subordination, and progression, developing from the ‘inside’ of the personality” is how a life becomes *our* life—how we “get a life,” as is now said.

The will (spirit) is mysterious from the point of view of the physical and social world, for there it is *causes*, not choices, that dominate. But one can never get a grip on his or her own life—or that of others—from the causal point of view. It is choice that matters. Imagine a person wondering day after day if he or she is going to learn Arabic or if he or she is going to get married to a certain person—just waiting, to see whether it would “happen.”

That would be laughable. But many people actually seem to live in this way with respect to major issues involving them, and with a deplorable outcome. That explains a lot of why lives go as they do. But to learn a language, and for the many even more important concerns of life, we must *intend the vision* if it is to be realized. That is, we must initiate, bring into being those factors that would bring the vision to reality.

And that, of course, brings us to the final element in the general pattern, that of *means* or instrumentalities. Carrying through with the pattern for the illustration at hand, you will sign up for language courses, listen to recordings, buy books, associate with people who speak Arabic, immerse yourself in the culture, possibly spend some intensive times in Jordan or Morocco, and practice, practice, practice.

There are means known to be effective toward transforming people into speakers of Arabic and so on. This is not mysterious. If the vision is clear and strong, and the employment of the means thoughtful and persistent, then the outcome will be ensured and, basically, adequate to the vision and intention.

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS ILLUSTRATES

ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION OF THE general pattern of personal transformation is provided by Alcoholics Anonymous and similar “twelve step” programs. Here, of course, the significance of the transformation or change is far greater for the person involved than in the case of learning a language; and the outcome is negative—that is, refraining from doing something very harmful, something that could possibly lead to untimely death. But the pattern is basically the same.

A desirable state of being is *envisioned*, and an *intention* to realize it is actuated in decision. *Means* are applied to fulfill the intention (and the corresponding decision) by producing the desirable state of being: in this case abstinence from alcohol and a life of sobriety with all that entails. The familiar *means* of traditional AA—the famous twelve steps and the personal and social arrangements in which they are concretely embodied, including a conscious involvement of God in the individual’s life—are highly effective in bringing about personal transformation.

Historically, the AA program was closely aligned with the church and Christian traditions, and now it has much to give back to a church that has largely lost its grip on spiritual formation as a standard path of Christian life. *Any successful plan*

for spiritual formation, whether for the individual or group, will in fact be significantly similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous program. There can be no doubt that the AA program originated and gained its power from Christian sources, to meet needs that Christian institutions at the time should have been meeting but were not. It works in terms of essential structures of the human self revealed by God through his people.

VIM: THE GENERAL PATTERN

WITH THESE TWO ILLUSTRATIONS before us (language learning and AA), the general pattern of personal transformation, which also applies to spiritual formation in the Christian tradition, should now be clear. Indeed, this is the pattern of all human accomplishment, even that which—like spiritual formation—can only occur at the initiative and through the constant direction and upholding of God, or through grace. To keep the general pattern in mind, we will use the little acronym “VIM,” as in the phrase “vim and vigor.”

- Vision
- Intention
- Means

“Vim” is a derivative of the Latin term “*vis*,” meaning direction, strength, force, vigor, power, energy, or virtue; and sometimes meaning sense, import, nature, or essence. Spiritual formation in Christlikeness is all of this to human existence. It is the path by which we can truly, as Paul told the Ephesians, “be empowered in the Lord and in the energy of his might” (Ephesians 6:10, PAR) and “become mighty with

his energy through his Spirit entering into the inward person” (3:16, PAR).

If we are to be spiritually formed in Christ, we must have and must implement the appropriate *vision, intention, and means*. Not just any path we take will do. If this VIM pattern is not put in place properly and held there, Christ simply will not be formed in us.

WHY WE FAIL AND DON’T GROW

AND HERE, IN A nutshell, is the explanation of the widespread failure to attain Christian maturity among both leaders and followers, referred to earlier. Those who are Christians by profession—and seriously so, we must add—today do not usually have, are not led into, the VIM that would enable them to routinely progress to the point where what Jesus himself did and taught would be the natural outflow of who they really are “on the inside.” Rather, what they are inwardly *is left substantially as it was*, as it is in nonChristians, and they are left constantly to battle with it. That is why today you find many professing Christians circling back to nonChristian sources to resolve the problems of their inner life.

Instead of inward transformation, some outward form of religion—often today even called “a spirituality”—is taken or imposed as the goal of practical endeavor. What is then important is to be a “good _____” (you can fill in the blank). And the respective social group—the “good _____s”—will enforce that importance, on pain of disapproval or exclusion from the group. Or the individual even enforces it upon himself or herself as what is “obviously” right. But, whatever the details, authentic inward transforma-

tion into Christlikeness is omitted. It is not envisioned, intended, or achieved.

Not so in the call of Jesus to live with him as his student or apprentice in his kingdom. By contrast, for him and for his Father, the heart is what matters, and everything else will then come along. And the process of inward renovation starts from the stark vision of life in the kingdom of God.

THE VISION OF LIFE IN THE KINGDOM

IF WE ARE CONCERNED about our own spiritual formation or that of others, this vision of the kingdom is the place we must start. Remember, it is the place where Jesus started. It was the gospel he preached. He came announcing, manifesting, and teaching the availability and nature of the kingdom of the heavens. “For I was sent for this purpose,” he said (Luke 4:43). That is simply a fact, and if we are faithful to it, do justice to it in full devotion, we will find our feet firmly planted on the path of Christian spiritual formation.

The kingdom of God is the range of God’s effective will, where what God wants done is done.³ It is, like God himself, from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 103:17; see also Psalm 93:1-2; Daniel 4:3; 7:14; and so on). The planet Earth and its immediate surroundings seem to be the only place in creation where God permits his will to be *not* done. Therefore we pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” and hope for the time when that kingdom will be completely fulfilled even here on earth (Luke 21:31; 22:18)—where in fact it is already present (Luke 17:21; John 18:36-37) and available to those who seek it with all their hearts (Matthew 6:13; 11:12; Luke 16:16). For those who do so seek it, it is true even now that “all things work together

for their good” (Romans 8:28, PAR), and that nothing can cut them off from God’s inseparable love and effective care (Romans 8:35-39). That is the nature of a life *in* the kingdom of the heavens now.

The vision that underlies spiritual (trans)formation into Christlikeness is, then, the vision of life now and forever in the range of God’s effective will—that is, *partaking* of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 3:1-2) through a birth “from above” and *participating* by our actions in what God is doing now in our lifetime on earth. Thus, “whatever we do, speaking or acting, doing all on behalf of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17, PAR). In everything we do we are permitted to do his work. What we are aiming for in this vision is to live fully in the kingdom of God and as fully as possible *now* and *here*, not just hereafter.

This is a vision of life that cannot come to us naturally, though the human soul-depths automatically cry out for something like it; and from time to time our deepest thinkers, visionaries, and artists capture aspects of it.⁴ It is a vision that has to be *given* to humanity by God himself, in a revelation suited to our condition. We cannot clearly see it on our own. And that revelation has been given through his covenant people on earth, the Jews, with the fullest flowering of the covenant people being Jesus himself.

Jesus was prepared for through centuries of rich and productive—though often painful—experience and thought among the Jews; through him the Jews have fulfilled their God-given responsibility and blessing of being a light to all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 18:18; 22:18; Isaiah 42:1-6; 60:3). Through them, indeed, all the nations of the earth *are*

and continue to be blessed and will be even more blessed in the future.

THE INTENTION TO BE A KINGDOM PERSON

THE VISION OF LIFE in the kingdom through reliance upon Jesus makes it possible for us to *intend* to live in the kingdom as he did. We can actually *decide to do it*. Of course that means first of all to trust him, rely on him, to count on him being the Anointed One, the Christ. It is through him that the revelation and the gift of the kingdom come to us individually. If we do not count on him as “the One,” we will have no adequate vision of the kingdom or of life therein and no way to enter it. He is “the door”; he is “the way.” Find another whoever can.

Concretely, we intend to live in the kingdom of God *by* intending to obey the precise example and teachings of Jesus. This is the form that *trust* in him takes. It does not take the form of merely believing things about him, however true they may be. Indeed, no one can actually believe the truth about him without trusting him by intending to obey him. It is a mental impossibility. To think otherwise is to indulge a widespread illusion that now smothers spiritual formation in Christlikeness among professing Christians and prevents it from naturally spreading worldwide.

Gandhi, who had looked closely at Christianity as practiced around him in Great Britain, remarked that if only Christians would live according to their belief in the teachings of Jesus, “we all would become Christians.” We know what he meant, and he was right in that. But the dismaying truth is that the Christians *were* living according to their “belief” in the teachings of Jesus. They didn’t believe them!

Moreover, knowing the “right answers”—knowing which ones they are, being able to identify them—does not mean we *believe* them. To believe them, like believing anything else, means that we are set to act as if they (the right answers) are true and that we will do so in appropriate circumstances. And acting as if the right answers are true means, in turn, that we intend to obey the example and teachings of Jesus the Anointed. What else would we intend if we *believed* he is who his people through the ages have declared him to be?

Perhaps the hardest thing for sincere Christians to come to grips with is the level of real unbelief in their own life: the unformulated skepticism about Jesus that permeates all dimensions of their being and undermines what efforts they do make toward Christlikeness.

The idea that you can trust Christ and not intend to obey him is an illusion generated by the prevalence of an unbelieving “Christian culture.” In fact, you can no more trust Jesus and not intend to obey him than you could trust your doctor and your auto mechanic and not intend to follow their advice. If you don’t intend to follow their advice, you simply don’t trust them. Period. (Of course in this case you might well have good reason.)

INTENTION INVOLVES DECISION

NOW, AN INTENTION IS brought to completion only by a *decision* to fulfill or carry through with the intention. We commonly find people who say they intend (or intended) to do certain things that they do (or did) not do. To be fair, external circumstances may sometimes have prevented them from carrying out the action. And habits deeply rooted in our bod-

ies and life contexts can, for a while, thwart even a sincere intention. But if something like that is not the case, we know that they never actually *decided* to do what they *say* they intended to do, and that they therefore did not really intend to do it. They therefore lack the power and order that intention brings into life processes.

Such may have *wished* that what they supposedly intend would happen, and perhaps they even *wanted* to do it (or for it to be done); but they did not decide to do it, and their intention—which well may have *begun* to develop—aborted and never really formed.

Procrastination is a common and well-known way in which intention is aborted, but there are many other ways. And, on the other hand, the *profession* or *statement* of intentions is a primary way of negotiating one's way through life regardless of whether or not the intention professed is really there. Promises and agreements involve the profession of intentions, and such a profession is often enough to get us what we want in our social context. But how very often in human affairs is a profession empty, even in vows to God. That is why Scripture deals with swearing and vain (empty) use of God's name at such lengths. If the genuine intention is there, the deed reliably follows. But if it is not there, the deed will most likely not be there either.

Now, the robust intention, with its inseparable decision, can only be formed and sustained upon the basis of a forceful vision. The elements of VIM are mutually reinforcing. Those whose word "is their bond," or "is as good as gold," are people with a vision of integrity. They *see* themselves standing in life and before God as one who does not say one thing and think another. They "mean what they say." This is greatly

valued before God, who abominates "swearing falsely" and honors those "who stand by their oath even when it harms them" (Psalm 15:4, PAR). Similarly, it is the vision of life in God's kingdom and its goodness that provides an adequate basis for the steadfast intention to obey Christ.

MEANS

THEN THE VISION AND the solid intention to obey Christ will naturally lead to seeking out and applying the means to that end. Here the means in question are the means for spiritual transformation, for the replacing of the inner character of the "lost" with the inner character of Jesus: his vision, understanding, feelings, decisions, and character. In finding such means we are not left to ourselves but have rich resources available to us in the example and teachings of Jesus, in the Scriptures generally, and in his people.

Suppose, for example, we would like to be generous to those who have already taken away some of our money or property through legal processes. Pure will, with gritted teeth, cannot be enough to enable us to do this. By what *means*, then, can we become the kind of person who would do this as Jesus himself would do it? If we have the vision and we intend (have decided) to do it, we can certainly find and implement the means, for God will help us to do so.

Here we shall only be briefly illustrative and shall leave fuller treatment to later chapters. We must start by discovering, by *identifying*, the thoughts, feelings, habits of will, social relations, and bodily inclinations that *prevent* us from being generous to these people. Our education and teachers should

help us here, and perhaps they do to some extent—but nearly always insufficiently.⁵

We might with a little reflection identify resentment and anger toward the person who needs our help as a cause of not helping him. And then there is *justice*. Ah, justice! Perhaps in the form of “I do not *owe* it to him. He has no claims on me.” Or perhaps we feel the legal case that went against us and in his favor was rigged or unfair.

Or again, perhaps we think we must secure ourselves by holding onto whatever surplus items we have. After all, we may say, who knows what the future holds? Or perhaps we think giving to people what is unearned by them will harm them by corrupting their character, leading them to believe one can get something for nothing. Or perhaps it is just not our habit to give to people with no prior claim on us—even if they have not injured or deprived us. Or perhaps our friends, including our religious friends, would think we are fools. And so forth.

What a thicket of lostness stands in the way of doing a simple good thing: helping someone in need, someone who just happens to have previously won a legal case against us, possibly quite justly. At this point it is the all-too-customary human thinking, feeling, and social practice that stands in the way. And, truthfully, it is very likely that little can be done *in the moment of need* to help one do the good thing that Jesus commands.

This is characteristic of all his example and teaching. When my neighbor who has triumphed over me in the past now stands before me in a need I can remedy, I will not be able “on the spot” to do the good thing if my inner being is filled with all the thoughts, feelings, and habits that characterize

the ruined soul and its world. Rather, if I intend to obey Jesus Christ, I must intend and decide to become the kind of person who *would* obey. That is, I must find the means of changing my inner being until it is substantially like his, pervasively characterized by his thoughts, feelings, habits, and relationship to the Father.

TRAINING “OFF THE SPOT”

THE MEANS TO THAT END are not all *directly* under my control, for some are the actions of God toward me and in me. But some are directly under my control.

I can, while not “on the spot,” retrain my thinking by study and meditation on Christ himself and on the teachings of Scripture about God, his world, and my life—especially the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, further elaborated by understanding of the remainder of the Bible. I can also help my thinking and my feelings by deep reflection on the nature and bitter outcome of *the standard human way* in such situations, in contrast to the way of Jesus. I can also consciously practice explicitly “self-sacrificial” actions in other, less “demanding,” situations. I can become a person for whom “looking out for number one” is not the framework of my life.

I can learn about and meditate upon the lives of well-known “saints,” who have practiced continuously, in real life, Jesus’ way with adversaries and those in need. I can take a close and thorough look at the bitter world of legal adversaries—at how people learn to hate one another in court—to see if I want to be a part of *that*. I can earnestly and repeatedly pray that God will directly work in my inner being to change the things there that will enable me to obey his Son.

And many other things can be done as *means* to fulfilling the vision of life in God that we intend and have chosen.

What we need to emphasize here is simply that the means of spiritual formation are available. In the spiritual life it is actually true that “where there is a will there is a way.” This is true here because God is involved and makes his help available to those who seek it.

On the other hand, where there is no will (firm intentions based on clear vision) there is no way. People who do not intend to be inwardly transformed, so that obedience to Christ “comes naturally,” will not be—no matter what means they think of themselves as employing. God is not going to pick us up by the seat of our pants, as it were, and throw us into transformed kingdom living, into “holiness.”

So the problem of spiritual transformation (the normal lack thereof) among those who identify themselves as Christians today is not that it is impossible or that effectual means to it are not available. The problem is that it is not intended. People do not see it and its value and decide to carry through with it. They do not *decide* to do the things Jesus did and said.

And this in turn is, today, largely due to the fact that they have not been given a vision of life in God’s kingdom within which such a decision and intention would make sense. The entire VIM of Christ’s life and life in Christ is not the intentional substance and framework of their life. Those who minister to them do not bend every effort to make it so. No wonder the example and teachings of Christ look, to many, more like fairy tales than sober reality.

We now turn to some of the things that can be done with God’s assistance in *each* of the dimensions of our life and being to renovate the human heart and progressively form

the inner, hidden world of the person so that “the tree is good” to the farthest reaches of root and branch.

Matters for

Thought and Discussion

1. Do the common failures of Christian leaders and lay people prove that transformation into Christlikeness is impossible?
2. Is “miserable sinner” Christianity an accurate portrayal of the redeemed life in Christ? What is the valid point in the “miserable sinner” version?
3. If we are active in the process of spiritual formation, does that mean we are acting “on our own”? How do grace and effort interrelate in spiritual growth?
4. What is the general pattern of all personal growth? Discuss the “Learning to Speak Arabic” case as an illustration.
5. Consider Alcoholics Anonymous as another illustration.
6. What is the biblical vision of our life in the kingdom of God? Give some details that would fit into your life.
7. How, concretely, can we “intend to live in the kingdom of God now”?
8. How does *intention* relate to *decision*? Can “knowing the right answers” substitute for intention and decision in the spiritual life?
9. What are the main *means* that you personally use for implementing your decision to live in the kingdom of God now? Are they adequate to the intention?
10. What measures of “off the spot” training for obedience to Christ do you employ?