

COVENANT CHARACTER

Next Sunday, some 1,320,000 Christians in 6,100 congregations of five great Presbyterian, Reformed, and Moravian denominations, will begin studying a two volume textbook called Into Covenant Life. This is not a required course, but an elective.

What for? It's sole purpose is to try and open the Bible for those to whom the Bible has long been a closed book. Will it succeed? No. No, it will not--except for those who will take study of the scriptures very seriously. For some others, for those who cannot think of any place they had rather go less than "back to the Bible", or for those who can "take it" only in short, popular lectures, called "lessons" or "sermons", where the only requirement is to be present in the audience and awake enough to criticize what is said, this "new help" will of course be no help at all, and the ten years labor put into it's preparation will be wasted on this particular crowd. as what has already been done was wasted on them.

But for those few who have enough self-discipline to study, (disciples) at least several hours a week--the Bible for themselves--and share their study with a small group of others also disciplined, it will offer some guidance. Not a great deal, but some. That's all it's intended to do: To lead you back to the word of God, that there He may speak to you. For many of us, Christ has become "the stranger". That's the reason we Christians are strangers to each other. We need to be re-introduced. This study offers us the opportunity--as adults--to get acquainted with Him--to whom we haven't spoken much--since childhood.

Some time ago--I asked a group of elders and deacons how long it had been since they had sat down and studied the Bible, seriously, to let God speak a word to them. Few of them could remember when. And this is understandable. After all it's easier and less disturbing to view T.V. , say the Cartrights on the Ponderosa, than to catch on to what those early Christians were up to in Palestine. T.V. programs require no discipline, and this is what some people want of the church covenant, but a program of Bible study does. It is a difficult task and we need all the help we can get.

Let me ask you something. Is it not true that most of us profess a faith we have put out very little effort to understand? And that if we understood it, we might not profess it, because of the change it might work in our lives? If we do not know the truth, how can it set us free? The Bible is the only source of the truth about Christian faith and life. Why, then, do we not study it? Maybe we do not study it for fear, fear of what we will find there--fear that in

this Gospel (God's story) --we shall find ourselves judged--our idiot phobias, our monstrous hates, our gulping greeds all naked, exposed. So we have the Bible closed--for to open it might be to find a new way of life--a way of quiet faith, and simple hope, and outgoing love--a way of life which we do not really trust and of which we are basically afraid?

That is something to think about--that we do not study the Bible--not because we are too busy, or too learned, or too sophisticated--but more basically and more simply--because we are scared to. Besides, we do not have any faith in its story of God's concern, and compassion, and forgiveness, and gentle grace. These old words frighten us, so we say they are foolishly idealistic. We do not really believe, do we, in the Christ of the Bible--if at all, only in the Christ of the churches. This is easier. We can maneuver the Christ of the churches--the Christ of stained glasses, and golden crosses, the Christ of church boards and committees and budgets. We can handle him and deal with him and make him in our likeness. We arrange the terms of the covenant to fit our character--but the Christ of the Bible story is different. If we dare to confront him in serious study, he is strangely alien to us--for he would handle us and deal with us--and make us over in His image. His simple integrity disturbs us: "Only happy", He said, "are the pure in heart, the peacemakers, give away what thou hast, forgive 70 x 7, love your enemy, take up thy cross, follow me, thy faith hath made thee whole." You get the point? The Biblical Christ frightens us. So, lets study something else, like psychology. Leave the Bible alone. It's a difficult and dangerous book. We don't want to be saved anyway, do we? We just want to succeed. We find heaven a bit of a strange place. We are more accustomed to the hell we live in and that isn't disturbed by the ecclesiastical Christ. So, go away, Jesus of Nazareth. Your cross is an affront to us a source of embarrassment really. We don't care if we're never resurrected, just well financed. We church people are afraid of the Biblical Christ figure, so we block the door of the church and we say to Him, "Go, and come no more....come not at all, never, never!"--The words of D's, "Grand Inquisitor". The old man who had served the church all his life and hated God and his fellow man, to the prisoner, Christ, whom the church has imprisoned, and whose clerics will not let out, for fear he'll hurt the budget. O God, what hypocrites we are, what terrible hypocrisy.

Well, by one way or another, it's time to enter "into covenant life". Not that any curriculum will do it. It will only be a help--if it leads us back to the study of the Bible to confront the real Christ there. But the real aim is not to change our methods; every generation must devise its own , and we've run through quite a few since the Sunday school was imported from England in the 1850's; but to change our life.

What on earth then is covenant life? It's life on earth in covenant with the Living Christ. As the Almighty said to Abraham of old: "I will make a covenant with you"--and to Israel: "You will be my people and I will be your God". As Jesus Christ said to his disciples: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, fulfilling the ancient prophecy: Behold the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with you."

So we today must learn to live--as individuals, as families, as a congregation--we must learn to live under Christ's command as a true community--in covenant --in agreement with our God and one another--worshipping together as a people of God, working together as a people of God, sharing our common life, shouldering our common lead as Christian brothers--with that same sound faith, that same sturdy hope and healing love as animated the primitive church.

This call to community Christian life--to common life in the body of Christ --we desperately need--we faceless moderns who know all the loneliness of a rampant individualism--all the fears of a mechanized existence--so mass produced, but so solitary--hoping for atomic heavens--fearing atomic hell--believing in little but our own strange psyches--and our expendibility.

O -- we need a return to the Covenant Community---before it is too late--and hell's gate slams on us--we need to give up our hates and greeds, and fears--and seek common cause under the good God who made us all, that as we belong to God, we belong together--Christian companions under one Christ--who loved us and gave Himself for us--that we might live eternally--the Covenant Life.