

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Distinctive Way of Life

by Kevin Perrotta

We are probably all familiar with the impression that the early Christians made on the inhabitants of the Roman empire: "See how they love one another." Retellings of Christian history less often describe how, for much of the first two centuries after Pentecost, the common view was that the Christians were "haters of the human race." In fact, both of these outsiders' impressions offer some insight into normal Christianity.

A quotation about Christians' care for one another comes from the late second century. The writer, Tertullian, who defends the Christians, explains that monthly, voluntary collections were taken up and the funds spent "not on banquets and drinking parties but to feed the poor and bury them, for boys and girls who lack property and parents, and then for slaves grown old and shipwrecked mariners, and for any who may be in the mines, on the penal islands, in prison." The

LEADING CHRISTIANS TO MATURITY

emperor Julian, who tried to reverse the trend toward Christianity in the fourth century, asked his pagan priests, "Why do we not observe that it is in their benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the apparent holiness of their lives that they have done most to increase atheism?" (by which he meant Christianity).

But earlier, when Christianity was brand new, it had a very negative public profile. When the Romans grew angry at Nero for burning the city in A.D. 64, he diverted their wrath toward the Christians, who were already unpopular. Persecutions during the first two centuries were often sparked by public outcry rather than government initiative.

Why this unpopularity? One historian writes that "the conviction that Christians were guilty of hatred for the human race" arose from their "apparent aloofness from the common life, so much so that Christians came to be called the "third race," neither pagan nor Jewish, but a race apart." The Christians kept their distance from the common entertainments, from the schools and hospitals (which had a pagan religious dimension), and from luxurious habits of dress, as well as from the communal religious practices. Christians were different—too different, in most people's view.

Whether non-Christians admired or despised them, everyone could see that the early Christians were a distinct people living a distinctive way of life. As people, for example, they had an evident care for one another. And they handled the aspects of daily living—family and work, time and money, ambition and anxiety—in a noticeably distinctive way.

Non-Christians who came into contact with Christians

A Distinctive Way of Life

in the Roman empire were, to a great degree, witnessing normal Christian living. The New Testament teaches that Christians are supposed to live as members of a people, following a God-given way of life.

Instructions for Daily Living

We usually think of the Christian message mainly as a set of beliefs, and miss the New Testament's emphasis on the body of teaching about the Christian way of life. Jesus made it a central part of His ministry to instruct His disciples in the life God intended men and women to live (for example, the Sermon on the Mount and the Last Supper discourse). The apostles and early church leaders made it a central part of their pastoral work to hand on and explain this instruction. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the writers of the New Testament passed on this teaching to the church for all time. It forms the measuring rod for determining the soundness of Christians' lives. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the *standard of teaching* to which you were committed" (6:17; see also 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2).

At the core of this daily-life teaching is the understanding that Christ came to make it possible for men and women to become sharers in God's own nature (2 Peter 1:4), to become like Him (Matt. 5:48; 1 John 3:2). The early Christians saw the New Testament teaching about how to live as a continuation and perfection of the teaching given to God's people in the Old Covenant. Jesus' revelation made it possible to live more fully in accord with God's intentions.

In his book *Gospel and Law*, C.H. Dodd has noted that much of the New Testament follows a pattern:

LEADING CHRISTIANS TO MATURITY

sections giving instruction in the truths of salvation are followed by sections in which the practical consequences are spelled out. The epistles, for example, often begin with teaching about the work of Christ and conclude with directions about how to live as Christians; for instance, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and 1 Peter. The *kerygma* ("proclamation" of the good news) and further instruction in the realities of the faith can be distinguished from passages presenting the *didache* (practical "teaching" about living—pronounced did' a kay).

Dodd identifies seven major propositions in the *didache*:

1. *The New Testament Christian is enjoined to reform his conduct.* For instance, Paul writes to the Ephesians: "Put off your old nature, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:22-24; see also Rom. 12:1-2; 13:11-14).

2. *The typical virtues of the new way of life are set forth.* "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (5:22-23; see also Col. 3:12).

3. *The proper Christian relationships within the family, the primary unit of the Christian community, are reviewed.* "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord....Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church....Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph. 5:22,25; 6:1; see also Col. 3:18-21; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

4. *Right relationships within the Christian community*

A Distinctive Way of Life

are set forth. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12:9-10; see also Col. 3:13-16; Phil. 2:1-4).

5. *A pattern of behavior toward pagan neighbors is described.* "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone" (Col. 4:5-6; see also 1 Peter 2:12,18).

6. *Correct relationships with constituted authorities are defined.* "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right" (1 Peter 2:13-14; see also Rom. 13:1-7).

7. *There is a call to watchfulness and responsibility.* "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8; see also Eph. 6:10-18).

Faithful to the Teaching

Christ, the apostles and the leaders of the early church considered the teaching about the Christian way of life to be the norm for Christians. They viewed the *didache* not as a distant ideal but as something that ordinary people would actually live out. Conversion meant new behavior: "By this it may be seen who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do what is right is not from God, nor he who does not love his brother" (1 John 3:10). "By their fruits you shall know them" (Matt. 7:20).

The early church was not perfect. But the early Christians followed the Christian way of life sufficiently well

LEADING CHRISTIANS TO MATURITY

that their distinctiveness—along with their bold announcement of the gospel—brought on them almost three centuries of persecution in the Roman empire, and at the same time helped to attract thousands of men and women to Christ, even though commitment to Him could end in martyrdom.

TODAY
In our own day it cannot be said that Christians in the West are following the teaching of Christ in a way that makes them particularly distinct. At a time when Western societies are swinging away from Christian values, Christians' lives are generally failing to become more clearly distinguishable. Rather, as society becomes less Christian, so do Christians' own patterns of life.

The picture that emerges from sociological studies is one of the persistence of certain key Christian beliefs, such as the divinity of Christ, but the erosion of Christian behavior. For example, specifically religious practices have been declining: Many people continue to believe in God, but fewer attend church on Sunday. Many continue to believe the Bible is God's Word, but far fewer read it regularly.

A survey by the Christian Advertising Forum in 1982 concluded: "There is a clear distinction between Christianity as a system of beliefs and values, and the manner in which people who profess to be Christians exercise those beliefs and values in their daily lives. The survey results suggest that scriptural exhortations to lead a Christ-like, Bible-based life-style are consistently ignored. American Christians have been captivated by secular opportunities and possessions."

A director of the United States Catholic bishops' office on family life once said that the increase of divorce and abortion among Catholics pointed to their

A Distinctive Way of Life

abandonment, in practice, of Christian values. Another Catholic sociologist compared American Catholic families with their secular counterparts this way: "Their values may differ. But their behavior doesn't."

Evidence also suggests that many churchgoing young people are unfaithful to Christian standards regarding sexual behavior.

The causes of the current situation are complex, and so the solutions must come from several angles. Many Christians need to be led to a more explicit commitment to follow Christ and to a greater openness to the power of the Holy Spirit. In order to live out a distinct way of life, Christians need to be more committed to and supportive of one another in the body of Christ. New approaches to pastoral care are also needed.

But certainly one of the reasons for contemporary Christians' failure to live according to New Testament teaching is simply that Christian leaders are failing to present the teaching fully, clearly and with practical wisdom about how to apply it to modern circumstances. Some practical teaching does get communicated in the course of preaching, counseling, Bible studies, and so on within the local Christian body. Some also comes through Christian television programs, magazines and books. But few churches and fellowships offer a comprehensive curriculum aimed at passing on the New Testament *didache* about Christian character, relationships and the rest. People receive bits and pieces of Christian teaching in ways that are often contradictory and almost always incomplete.

Thus, a necessary element in leading Christian people back to general faithfulness to scriptural teaching must be a pastorally wise presentation of that teaching

LEADING CHRISTIANS TO MATURITY

for our own day. For many Christian leaders, the starting point will be a recognition of pastoral responsibility in this area and a closer study of the biblical *didache*.

Making It Work

Christian leaders who seek to pass on the New Testament *didache* to the Christians in their care will face numerous challenges. In the social environments where we all live, varieties of a "secular *didache*" are being promoted. Television and the newspapers are filled with selfish solutions to life's problems. The schools are open channels for "value-free" propaganda about how to relate to adults, choose a career and handle sex. Workplaces are often dominated by gossip and slander and a "go for it, you deserve it" mentality. Nevertheless, a wise presentation of the New Testament teaching can have a powerful effect on Christians who are seeking to understand how to live out their faith. To pastoral leaders seeking to do this, the following advice may be offered:

1. *Integrate the didache in the total pastoral care in the local Christian body.* What I am proposing is that pastoral leaders give their people a comprehensive program of instruction, a curriculum, that faithfully explains the New Testament teaching about the Christian way of living. The New Testament teaching is itself the *standard* for Christian living. What we need to formulate is a *presentation* of it that helps people live up to the standard. Our presentation of the daily-life teaching is a pastoral tool which, along with other aspects of pastoral care, helps fellow Christians take on a new way of life.

If we want to help everyone in the church or fellowship live in accord with the New Testament standard,

A Distinctive Way of Life

we will need to set up our curriculum in such a way that everyone is brought through it. We will also need to establish the instruction as a step of the process by which new people enter the Christian body we are leading.

As a central element of the life of the church, practical teaching about how to live is the responsibility of the overall leadership of the local church body. It is not a detachable responsibility that can be left to people who have a professional background in religious education or a talent for effective speaking. The main leadership must develop the presentation as a key element of the pastoral care by which they are leading the Christian body into a way of life pleasing to the Lord.

Communicating, as it does, the scriptural teaching about how to live, and coming from the leaders of the church body or Christian group, the presentation has real authority. It sets the standard for behavior and relationships in the church or fellowship. Thus when an issue arises about how to raise children, the body of practical teaching sets the ground rules for all the members. When a dispute arises among the members, there is a body of teaching which all members recognize as necessary to follow (the obligation to seek reconciliation, going to the other party directly, and so on).

The leaders not only present the instruction with the authority it has as a communication of God's Word. They also call the members to live it out day by day, offering both encouragement and correction. Of course, if the leaders are to call others effectively to live out the teaching, they must first of all recognize its authority over themselves. Their own obedient efforts to put the scriptural teaching about character and relationships into

LEADING CHRISTIANS TO MATURITY

practice is crucial.

2. *Keep the didache rooted in the kerygma.* The practical teaching about living is possible in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The daily-life teaching rests on the foundation of God's saving work in Christ and men's and women's response to Him.

Thus the first pastoral priority is to communicate the gospel effectively. It will do little good to provide better practical teaching to people who have not personally responded to the gospel or do not experience much of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament pastoral approach is to urge Christians to "live a life worthy of your call." If people have not personally responded to the call of Christ, our presentation of the *didache* can become an elaborate appeal to willpower, a lengthy exhortation to try harder, even a manipulation of feelings of guilt. Without personal commitment to Christ and the power of the Spirit, the motivation and the means to live out the practical teaching will be largely lacking. And unless Christians continue to be fed on the fundamental truths of the faith, they will find it increasingly difficult to live out the teaching.

In addition, we should keep the perspective that the *didache* is itself good news because it is God's wisdom for living in a way that works. Surely we have all had the experience of discovering that. I myself could not enumerate the ways that grasping a scriptural principle has made life more peaceful and work more successful.

3. *Present a program of practical instruction about living.* If our instruction in Christian character and relationships is to be helpful, it must be practical and concrete. Christians in our churches and groups need not only to hear that they must love one another, be faithful,

A Distinctive Way of Life

train their emotions, resist the devil, tame their tongue, and so on. They need to know what those directions actually mean. What do they like in real life? How does a person go about putting them into practice? If our presentation is vague and merely inspirational, it will fail in its main purpose. As pastoral leaders we need a clear enough understanding of the scriptural teaching that we can tell whether people are succeeding or failing in living it out. And the people we are teaching need to be able to tell, too.

Our presentation also needs to help people apply the New Testament teaching to their particular life situations. Another way to say this is that people need instruction about handling their roles and responsibilities according to God's intentions. Children need teaching about how to relate to parents and other adults. Young men and women need to be taught about the Christian way of settling on a direction in life and seeking a spouse. Husbands and wives need to learn how to serve one another and their children in their respective roles. Scripture provides principles and models in these areas which we need to grasp and communicate.

4. *Teach from Scripture, and look for developed presentations of the scriptural teaching.* Through the centuries Christians have used Scripture directly in teaching about how to live. While it is helpful to summarize and synthesize the scriptural *didache*, it remains the case that Scripture itself has a peculiar effectiveness for teaching. Traditionally, the wisdom books of the Old Testament have been widely used, and of course so has the practical teaching about qualities of character and principles of relationships given in the New Testament.

It is also wise to look for books and tape series in

LEADING CHRISTIANS TO MATURITY

which other Christian leaders have already thought through the questions about how to present the biblical teaching, and which offer pastorally wise advice about how to apply it.

Giving practical, scriptural instruction about the Christian way of life is a tool not only for helping individual men and women live more closely according to the pattern that God intends for human life. We should aim at more than helping fellow believers go out and do a better job following the Lord in all their separate circumstances. Christian living is not essentially individualistic but corporate. So we should also be working to build up Christians' life together. Much of the New Testament teaching about how to live has to do with being a people who have a common way of life: "Bear one another's burdens. Love one another with brotherly affection. Address one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs." It is to this corporate dimension of Christian living that we shall turn our attention next.