

A Reflection on the Meaning of Christ-Consciousness

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Let the same mind be in you...

Saint Paul exhorted the followers of Jesus in the Greek city of Philippi to follow the example of Jesus' humility: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:4) This statement follows Paul's challenge in verse 2 to "...be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Paul describes the source of this kind of intimate and complete unity in a poetic narrative that may have been part of an early catechetical hymn that declares: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (verses 5-8) Paul's point is simple and direct: a person who desires to walk in the footsteps of Jesus must share Jesus' "mind" or consciousness. He or she must

look at and respond to life in the same way that Jesus did. How is this possible? In verses 12 and 13 of the same chapter Paul declares: “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me (i.e. listened and responded), not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you for his good pleasure.” The path toward unity of mind with each other and with Christ Jesus lies in collaborating with God who is already at work in each person. Paul points to the necessity of aligning our desires with God’s “good pleasure.” In other words, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”

Why is consciousness important?¹

Consciousness is an integral part of every human life. Although I am not a psychologist or neurologist I have learned a few things about consciousness from my life experience and the wisdom of my mentors. Consciousness has at least three dimensions. Being “conscious” is a state of being physically and neurologically awake. Being “conscious” also means being aware of what is happening within and all around us. There is a

¹ Excerpted from: David Keller. *Come and See: The transformation of Personal Prayer*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2005

third dimension called the “sub-conscious.” This usually refers to an intuitive awareness of something that is not perceived directly by thought, emotion, or activity. All three dimensions are ways that a person gets in touch with reality and contribute to a person’s “consciousness.” Consciousness is the window or lens through which each person perceives her or his interior and exterior life. It is the way we “see life.” This “frame” of awareness shapes a person’s knowledge, relationships, and actions. It will influence the development of a person’s core values. Consciousness is an essential aspect of our life with God, other persons, our work, families, society, and creation. This “vision” of life shapes our judgments, decisions, and behavior. Therefore, consciousness is a fundamental and practical part of getting things done and doing them well. The formation of our consciousness will determine how we live, and move, and have our being.

The four canonical gospels present a portrait of the consciousness of Jesus.² Jesus taught that authentic knowledge of God flows from experience of and union with God. Once God is known from personal experience, God’s presence and wisdom are recognized everywhere in life. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From

² I have chosen to concentrate on the way the four canonical gospels record Jesus’ deep consciousness of God. There are other early records as well, especially *The Gospel of Thomas*.

now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:7 NRSV) People who listened to Jesus’ teaching experienced his consciousness of God. “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” (Matthew 7:28-29) But how does our consciousness become congruent with the way God sees the world?

A more complete human consciousness...

In his book, *Seeking the Face of God*, William H. Shannon refers to the doctrine of “The Fall of Humankind” as “deformed consciousness.” God created women and men to be completely aware of what is fundamentally real. By wanting to have “more” than that, human beings choose to create thoughts and ways of living that are not real. By wanting to know all things we deform our unity with God and creation and prefer the knowledge of good and evil. This dichotomy is the foundation of all dualistic thinking and action. We created a consciousness that looks at life in terms of “me” and “everyone and everything else.” This is the source of self-serving individualism. It is, in the words of Shannon, “deformed consciousness.”

William Shannon has edited over 4,000 letters of Thomas Merton. Influenced by Merton, he described contemplative experience as a path to

restore our original consciousness. It is always there, but we so often choose to prefer and act out of an unreal or semi-real consciousness. Here is how Shannon describes the difference between “ordinary awareness” and “total awareness.”

“At this point I should make it clear that the kind of awareness I have been talking about (what I called “ordinary” awareness) is only a preliminary condition for achieving that *total awareness* that is contemplation. Total awareness is more than simply being in touch with what is happening about us (though that is important.) Total awareness is not just a matter of being more alert than others. It is nothing less than a whole new way of life whereby we move to an entirely different level of consciousness, in which we come to see God, ourselves, and all else that is in an entirely new light. We undergo a *metanoia*, a conversion that is not just a change in behavior but a transformation of consciousness. We enter into a new world in which we see reality as it actually is; or, to say the same thing in a different way, we return to the world in which we were intended to exist from the beginning.”³

³ William H. Shannon. *Seeking the Face of God*. New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1988. Page 120

The way towards this transformation of consciousness is relational. We place ourselves in a mutual presence with God. In that inner space, as Jesus called it, there is no differentiation between each of us and God. We have distinct “presences”, but we are totally together in the same way that Jesus described: *“I and the Father are one.”* He was not making a theological statement about his identity. He was describing the reality of his contemplative experience. Thomas Merton puts it this way:

“In other words, then, contemplation reaches out to the knowledge and even to the experience of the transcendent and inexpressible God. It knows God by seeming to touch Him. Or rather it knows Him as if it had been invisibly touched by Him...Touched by Him Who has no hands, but Who is pure Reality and the source of all this is real. Hence contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real...Contemplation is also a response to a call: a call from Him who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depth of our being: for we ourselves are words of his. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer Him, to echo Him, and even in some sense to contain Him and signify Him. Contemplation is this echo. It is a deep resonance in the innermost center of

our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and re-sounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One.”⁴

Christ-consciousness is seeing and acting with eyes of love...

Is this a pious “pipe dream” disconnected from “real life?” I have said, “The way I see it...” many, many times. Is the way I see “it” the way “it” really is? I know from my own experience that the way I “see” it directs my actions. My temptation is to assume that my vision of a situation is the most appropriate perspective for choosing a course of action. Meditation and contemplative prayer offer a more inclusive perspective because they mentor me in the discipline of listening to Someone besides myself! Listening will inform my vision because it helps me cultivate a heart that is open to the wisdom and compassion of God. A listening heart is the link to seeing as God sees. Contemplative prayer and meditation are disciplines in the art of listening with the ear of the heart and seeing with eyes of love. They are the womb of *sacred consciousness*. They link the head with the heart and bond work with the spiritual dimension of life. They are simple, yet their effects can be profound. Although these forms of praying may seem passive, they are

⁴ Thomas Merton. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 1972. Pages 2-3 passim.

essential parts of getting things done and doing them well. They are concerned with the source and motives of our actions. As Christians this means having “the mind of Christ.”⁵ Henri Nouwen reminds us that this is an audacious challenge. “Indeed, we are called to know what Jesus knew and do what Jesus did. Do we really want that, or do we prefer to keep Jesus at arms’ length?”⁶

Having the mind of Christ is an integral part of being human. It was the passionate desire of Jesus for every person. What would society be like if we could see and care for each other with the mind and consciousness of Christ?

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⁵ As St. Paul declares, quoting the Hebrews scriptures, “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.” 1 Corinthians 2:16 NRSV Paul is speaking from the very personal experience of his conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). His consciousness was changed from that of a person who persecuted and approved of the torture and death of followers of Jesus to seeing Jesus in a totally new light. While in Damascus, in the home of a follower of Jesus, “...immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.” Paul was given a totally new way of seeing the world and those around him.

⁶ Henri Nouwen. *Bread for the world*. Quoted in the Henri Nouwen Society Daily Meditation eLetter, June 2, 2008