

6 Where are You, Divine Lord?

Oh! Divine Lord, hide yourself, test us, mingle, confuse and snap like threads all our ideas and systems. Let us stumble and find neither roads nor paths in the darkness. Formerly we found you in the peace of solitude, in prayer, in various religious exercises, in suffering, in helping our neighbors, in turning away from social and business affairs. We have done all we can do to please you, but now we can no longer find you in these things as we once did. May our failure compel us to find you in yourself and then in all things and everywhere."¹

--Caussade

1Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

5Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. 7You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. 8But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 9Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices 10and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. 11Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

12Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

15Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."²

--Paul



¹ Caussade, pp.96-97. Emphasis mine.

² Colossians 3:1-17, NIV. Emphasis mine.

A few questions: Are you a “self-made person?” Would you rather work for yourself or someone else? Do you like to figure things out or read an expert?

“Stage III”

Some rather good books have been published in the past twenty years on what it means to grow in faith. According to these authorities we tend to pass through “stages”³ as we make our way from the earliest forms of self-centered, infant “faith” to the rare, unselfconscious love of Jesus as taught in the Sermon on the Mount.⁴ There are six of these stages of growth, the most important of which is what Fowler calls “Synthetic-Conventional Faith.” This is the “most common stage” of faith that we find among adults in American churches. From this point on we will call this stage of faith “Stage III.”

One enters Stage III in adolescence and most stay in Stage III until death. If this is true, we need to pay attention to what is happening in this stage of faith since we will spend most of our life there. This is especially important for ministers and other religious professionals in that they will work with this level person, trying to relate them to God and, if possible, move them on to deeper levels of faith. I think we can pretty well grasp the essentials of Stage III by learning the meaning of five words: synthetic, conventional, tacit, symbolic, and contradiction. Okay, let’s move on to the five word dictionary of Stage III.

Jesus, Our Magnificent Obsession

There are few things in life more wonderful than the discovery of a magnificent obsession. This is precisely what we discover in Jesus the Christ, Son of the Living God. He is our magnificent obsession. He is the pearl of great price, the treasure in the field, and the bright and shining star. Seems strange to talk like that, doesn’t it. Yet I love to think of Jesus through these symbols. I don’t talk about anyone else this way, well, my wife, Ruth, is an exception to this rule. Yet, even in the seminary where I taught for twenty-seven years, the faculty and students did not tend to talk this way. Maybe in their private moments they did, as I did in mine.

³ I recommend Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, [The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy](#), pp. 84-115. Their work, especially with the findings of Erik Erikson and James Fowler, is very helpful for those professionals dealing with the significance of social norms and ritual in the shaping of faith.

⁴ Matthew 5-7.

It is difficult for a Christian to talk about Jesus, at least with words of endearment. The reason is that so often the words fall on ears that think us a bit loony. But, then, I am talking with believers, aren't I? And a believer is one who not only believes as one who is convinced in his head; he is also one who is convinced in his heart. Head and heart, that's the way it is with believers, so the Apostle John said in his Gospel. So when I write of loving Jesus, you know exactly what I mean, don't you? And you are not embarrassed by that kind of talk, are you? But what has Jesus to do with Stage III? Everything. So let's move to the five words of our little dictionary of Phase III.

Synthetic: There are six stages in the process of growing into God's likeness, into having the "mind of Christ;" Stage III is obviously slap-dab in the middle. When we have reached Stage III we have made some progress and yet there is a way to go before reaching the end. Yet most of us will spend our spiritual lives in Stage III. If we can find out why we like it there, perhaps we can get out and go on to better things--more significant stages with their wonders of faith.

Stage III is synthetic. By that, Fowler means that unlike previous stages, Stage III, adolescence, is that age level where we tend to begin the process of bringing things together. We do that because we are looking for "a great fidelity." Maybe a "magnificent obsession." So we synthesize; we blend together. The opposite of synthesizing is separating, pulling into parts. If I say to a Stage IIIer that nature reveals God to us, that doesn't sound crazy. We see God's creating "hand" everywhere--and this is one of the fundamentals of true spirituality. To synthetic let's add the word conventional.

Conventional: Stage III is "conventional;" that is, it does not step outside the boundaries of its faith long enough to critically analyze what it is thinking and why. Most of us have our faith fenced in; we keep it safe from disturbance and threat by reinforcing our faith through books, friends, spiritual leaders, even educational systems can be pigeon-holed, such as liberal, orthodox, or evangelical. My way is the right way! Your way, sorry to say, is the wrong way.

I was walking to my station at the store when I heard her calling me from a small room. Stepping up to the half-door I looked in and saw her altering a dress for a customer. "I hear you are going to be a preacher," she said in a nice voice. "Yes" "Well," she

responded kindly, “Are you a member of (her church)?” “No, I am a Methodist.” “Too bad,” she said in the same sweet tone, “You are going to hell.” Now that can rock you if you are a young man fresh out of adolescence. Her faith was conventional, though she was well passed adolescence. She was living out Stage III at thirty-three.

Tacit: Stage IIIers hold beliefs that are basically unexamined. All of us do this to some extent, but adolescents often become members of a group for reasons they can’t explain or are purely self-centered. Take the question of authority for one’s beliefs, for example. Stage IIIers locate the grounds for their authority outside themselves. The church is a prime example of this notion. Many Christians have jettisoned their “traditional” liturgical practices or structures for something more “modern,” appealing to today’s adult tastes. So we don’t hold our songs in our hands; we look up to a screen for them. We don’t use creeds to help us define faith, we become members of small groups that discuss what we think and how we feel with few or no anchors to the past. If enough people say these newer ways of thinking are good, then they are good. If a best-selling author says our old ways of believing are out-worn, then they must be out-worn. We don’t have to think about it much any more. Our beliefs are tacit, unexamined.

Symbolic: All of us are symbol-making beings. Some people think this is the meaning of the word human. To say a Stage IIIer is tied to symbols is not saying much. However, to tie being an authentic Christian to a particular set of symbols is narrow-minded at the least. I have known people who would not deny that I was a professing Christian, yet I could never reach the pinnacle of faith unless I joined their group and confessed Christ as they did. On this basis, I have met some who would not fellowship with me in this world while being assured that they would see me in the next.

In my city a very effective pastor was kicked out of his church because he refused to limit Holy Communion to the members of his church. The symbolic value of Holy Communion being a uniting supper for all Christians, regardless of church affiliation, was lost on those Stage IIIers on his board in their attempt to hold to the true faith as their church had traditionally done (true as they perceived truth). While they did not deny the Christian experience of other believers, they needed symbols they understood and to stay with them...period.

Contradiction: Everyone--well, almost everyone--likes life smooth and peaceful, though what peaceful means can be debated. And as long as we see life as rather tranquil, at least more so than chaotic, we will punch the optimistic button every time. But some-times what we need is a kick in the pants in order to grow in the Spirit. So far we have categorized Stage IIIers as synthetic, conventional, tacit, and symbolic.

Moving away from Stage III, even if it is going on to Stage IV or more, is not easy. We normally need something to jar us, like St. Paul's striking conversion recorded in Acts 9 did for him. The loss of a loved one or career, a near-death experience, etc., can be enough to shake us to pursue a deeper relationship with the Almighty. This is a benefit, of course, and has its own rewards, especially a new depth of love. This is what Caussade's insight are designed to do. He wants to shake us up by challenging our safe belief structure and launch us out into spiritual space.

Caussade as Contradiction

Did the Caussade quote for this lesson make sense to you when you read it? There are many Christians who would think his teachings a bit strange to say the least. This means that these believers are functioning at an adolescence level spiritually, desiring but not having a great obsession, who regard their understanding and experiencing of faith the true one, locate their authority for faith outside themselves (non-critical thinking), and regard their circle of faith as the interpreter of authentic belief. Do you recognize that person? Is he or she your pastor? Your Sunday School teacher? The chairperson of your board? The author of the books you find helpful? Basically, *this Stage IIIer is narrow-minded, theologically orthodox, considers faith as a personal, subjective experience, and is uncomfortable in the presence of Christians who are different from themselves.*

This little study of one aspect of spiritual growth is not given here for purposes of judgment. The person we have been studying can be a wonderful Christian person with a deep appreciation for other Christians, deep in bible study and prayer, and consciously aware of their desire to have Christ's mind in themselves, a mind of peace, love, hope, all colored by optimism in Christ. Rather, we are saying that this is one stage on the road to the greatest experience of Christ we can know in this life: **Unselfconscious love**. This is love for others unmarked by one's own needs and desires; Christ being the magnificent

obsession of our hearts.

But how is Caussade a contradiction? Take a good look at the content of his short prayer.

“Oh! Divine Lord, hide yourself, test us, mingle, confuse and snap like threads all our ideas and systems. Let us stumble and find neither roads nor paths in the darkness.”

Isn't this about the opposite of what most of us pray concerning the presence of God? Without guidance from above the road before us is no more than darkness. Who wants to walk in darkness, as far as God is concerned? Doesn't this conflict with Psalm 121 and its assurance of God's presence? Not necessarily. At some place in our lives, most of us experience the hiddenness of God...and we don't like it one bit. We become little children in a crowd, with no mother or father in sight. We are frightened.

What does Caussade want? Simply this, that we not become overly dependent on certain prayers, particular authors, or denominational certainties. He knows we humans become too quickly dependent on things we can see to explain what we cannot see. There is a danger to that. We may focus so much on a certain pastor that we miss the God he is speaking about. Therefore, O Lord, shake us up so that we will know You. Help us to know that no human can guarantee Your presence. No one of us, no matter how hard we try, can demand that You do what we want. Help us to live by faith and love You more than what You do for us.

Formerly we found you in the peace of solitude, in prayer, in various religious exercises, in suffering, in helping our neighbors, in turning away from social and business affairs. We have done all we can do to please you, but now we can no longer find you in these things as we once did.

St. Paul once spoke of his being a child in spiritual matters. But in 1 Corinthians 13 he also speaks of going beyond childhood to maturity, leaving childhood behind. This is it! Caussade has it. Adolescence is a necessary phase of growing up, but there comes a time when adolescence must be left behind. We need to go on to maturity. What a shame if we become stuck in adolescence. What if we only saw God through children's eyes? What would we miss? “May our failure compel us to find you in yourself and then in all things and everywhere.” Caussade says we would be too limited in opening ourselves to God, too dependent on the securities of our childhood.

Jesus as Contradiction

Jesus' summary of His teachings in what we call the Sermon on the Mount are a rock of offense, if we may borrow from St. Paul. The many who heard Him on the mountainside that day certainly gasped at what they heard. At times Jesus seemed to blow their traditional teachings out of the water. While I have recommended reading the "Sermon" several times in our study, now is the time to give it a fresh look from the standpoint of Jesus' social and theological concerns. So, why not stop at this point and reread Matthew 5-7. Note Jesus' emphasis on the kingdom of God, importance of the land (earth), peace, mercy, murder, adultery, divorce, lying, hunger for God, the poor, and judging others. In many ways, our Lord corrected or reunderstood important ethical teachings in the Old Testament.

St. Paul's understanding of the way of salvation and personal/social ethics are based on Jesus' teachings. A really good section of the Book of Colossians shows the results of Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf, and the extent of conversion in our hearts that has now become possible. Listen to what St. Paul has to say about spiritual fullness in the Lord.

6So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, 7rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

8See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

9For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. 11In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 12having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

*13When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, **God made you alive with Christ.** He forgave us all our sins, 14having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. 15And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.⁵*

⁵ Colossians 2:6-15, NIV. Emphasis mine.

I have met people who told me they could not live a Christian life, much less the one taught by Jesus and Paul.

Caution: It may be possible for someone to read what I write and come up with a mistaken idea. That is always one of my fears as a witness to Christ the Lord. Living a Stage III life, or Stage IV or V, does not mean a watering down of the essential Gospel message: to wit, that *God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth so that He lived among us as the Son of God, Messiah; that He died for us, was raised for us, and is coming again for us. The Bible gives us a faithful witness of His life and message, and the history of the early church, which the Holy Spirit fills for the glory of God.* Growing up does not mean dumbing down. So we Christians, wherever we are on the road to the kingdom, are His, living and dying for Him, and we will see Him as He is. This is a glorious Gospel. It is being in touch with the living Christ.

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