

Will Self-Sacrifice Work?

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Will self-sacrifice work? The question is a proper one, because Christian self-sacrifice is not an end in itself. It is a means to the realization of love to God and neighbor. When it is separated from love and sought for its own sake, self-sacrifice becomes a source of self-righteousness. It issues in a morbid austerity and a shriveling of the self rather than a purposeful magnanimity and the fruition of self.

The question is proper, also, because its answer is not obvious. Indeed, many persons who are attracted by the Christian ideals of love, justice, and liberty react against self-denial. Self-sacrifice is deemed unnecessary for our love for God and a probable hindrance to our love for neighbor and self.

Is self-sacrifice effective in a world of systems and power politics? Granted, *if* the grain that feeds the beef an American eats could reach a hungry family in Bangladesh, it would probably lengthen the lives of the members of that family. And if one family member were less than two years old, he or she would probably be saved from permanent brain damage. But there is no guarantee that the grain thus saved would ever get out of the U.S.A. Saving the grain might contribute to lower food prices and to farmers' withholding land from production. Therefore, are not political efforts to bring about a more just U.S. food policy far more important than cutting down on the beef we eat? One person's altered life style seems a futile gesture. Are not attempts at self-sacrifice a form of escapism?

Self-sacrifice also seems contrary to the Christian and humanist emphasis on liberation and self-fulfillment. What is the place of self-sacrifice in the efforts of blacks, women, and the poor to fulfill their potential as human beings? Is not the struggle to gain one's own human rights hindered by a willingness to surrender those rights? Also, does not self-sacrifice lead to a self-degradation which is at odds with God's desire to make us more responsible and more fully human?

The answer to these questions is that self-sacrifice is a relevant and necessary part of our relationships with God, neighbor, and self. The neglect of self-sacrifice has caused serious deficiencies in the Church's faith and witness. It has led to the illusion that social progress is possible without cost. Specifically, the failure to call its members to self-sacrifice is crippling the Church's efforts to respond to the greatest social issue of our day: the unjust imbalance between the rich and poor of the world.

I. The Sacrifice of Self

Self-sacrifice is, first and most importantly, a necessary condition for fellowship with God. Our self-denial does not create this fellowship. God has done

that. But nothing short of self-denial will allow us to enter his fellowship. Communion with God as Lord requires the death of the self as the ultimate object of our trust and affection. It requires the surrender of our relative security in order to find Christ's security and insecurity. It requires discipline, suffering, and the willingness to die.

Thus self-sacrifice is far from being an optional nicety of the Christian life. It is not a practice for only especially dedicated persons or for only certain periods of the year. It is a central requirement. Will self-sacrifice work? The answer is that nothing less will work.

The failure of the church to take seriously Christ's call to a self-denying yielding of ourselves to him is one source of the unfortunate division between Christians who emphasize conversion and personal piety and those who emphasize political action and social justice. Self-sacrifice is a point where evangelism, worship, and Christian social action all meet. Christian conversion, prayer, and ethics all begin with the surrender of our selves to God and the desire for his will to be done in all areas of our lives and all areas of the world.

The message of the personal evangelist is, at root, the same as the message of the social prophet. It is a call to repentance, discipleship, and self-sacrifice, a call to let our self-will be crucified, a call to place all areas of our lives under God's care and command.

The temptation for the evangelist is not to go with Christ far enough. The personal and the religious realms of life are surrendered to God but not the economic and political realms. A half-way conversion allows us the solace of considering ourselves to be God's people while making no effort to change those parts of our lives which are contrary to God's will for justice and peace in the world.

The temptation of the social prophet is not to start from the beginning. Thus, efforts to improve society are not founded upon a surrender of self to God. We try to change the world without changing ourselves. Such efforts may often produce reform that is in accord with God's intentions, but they easily fall prey to arrogance or disillusionment; and they may produce a cold shell of structural justice, unaccompanied by acts of personal kindness and sacrificial love. Social concern without self-denial can also lead to an elitist directing of societal change "for the sake of the poor" or a paternalistic helping of the poor rather than a genuine involvement with the poor in their struggles.

A spirit of self-sacrifice likewise unites the prophet with the mystic. Christian devotional life and Christian social service both require the willingness to follow Christ wherever he leads: to poverty, to rejection by friends, even to death. The spirit of Christian contemplation is the spirit of discipleship which Jesus demanded when he said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34). True prayer is not an escape from our responsibilities in the world; rather it is an act of self-forgetful yielding to Christ and his commands for service.

In prayer and in service we give ourselves to God so that he can mold us into instruments devoted to his purposes. We are transformed and made whole in order to enjoy his company, labor in his kingdom, and to do his will among humankind. We are freed from self so that we may live for God and for others.

Worship and prayer are not simply means to a better moral life. Communion with God is not simply preparation for service in the world; it is the chief end of life. But this communion is found and strengthened in the sacrificial giving of oneself to God in both contemplation and service. Thus prayer and discipleship strengthen each other because both result in the increased placing of areas of our lives under God's direction.

The prophet and mystic both are able to distance themselves from society. They are not controlled by the systems of society because their loyalty is to the Lord over society. Thus they are able to stand against society and criticize it. *The process of liberating ourselves from bondage to the false lords of the system is inseparable from the process of liberating others.*

II. *The Sacrifice of Wealth*

So far we have been using the terms self-sacrifice and self-denial in their basic sense: the surrender of self to God. *Is it proper also to use these terms for the sacrifice of wealth or the abstinence from certain luxuries?* Certainly, we must reject the idea that self-denial means the giving up of a few pleasures, for example during Lent. On the other hand, no self-denial is complete which does not involve the placing of our economic life under the Lordship of Christ.

The Bible repeatedly warns that possessions are one of the most dangerous obstacles to a self-forgetful commitment to God. Reliance upon possessions instead of God for our security is a prevalent form of unbelief. "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt.6:24). For the rich young man who sought eternal life, self-denial meant the selling of possessions (Mk.10:17-22). Jesus warned about the danger of riches: "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God" (Mk.10:23).

Thus it behooves all American Christians to ask what self-denial means for us in our economic life. Let us remember that we are not talking about an optional area of the Christian life. We are talking about an absolute requirement.

What does economic self-sacrifice mean in America? I confess that I do not know the answer. Certainly what many Americans would consider sacrificial would seem luxurious to most of the world's people. My family is trying to practice a life-style that does not set us apart from the Indonesians around us. We are not succeeding. We spend \$400 a month, more than—though within range of—any of the families of my colleagues on the seminary faculty and eight times as much as the average Indonesian family of our size. Our family of four eats around three-fourths of a pound of meat a day; our neighbors eat no meat except on festive occasions. We drive a second-hand Toyota Corolla about 6000 miles a year. Only one of our neighbors has a car. Most ride bicycles or public transportation. The well-to-do have motorcycles. We are limited to 700 watts of electricity. Most of our neighbors have less than 200 watts. Our neighbors are all middle-class Indonesians, but they have far less than the poor in America.

Yet during our furlough in America we found that we needed much more just to do the things we felt were important. We could not live and work without a telephone, 3000 watts of electricity, and a car that travelled 18,000 miles in

ten months. American society is organized in a way that makes it impossible to live at a level which the majority of the world's people would regard as simple. I once tried to explain to a group of Indonesian students why poor people in America usually need cars to shop or to get to work. The students laughed. Indonesians can do everything they need to do without a car. Some walk up to five miles to work each day. There are trains, large buses, small buses, and pedicabs going in every direction. Only the rich have cars.

American Christians, therefore, must work for a national pattern of life that is less dependent on automobiles, airplanes, gadgets, paper, and disposable products. In the meantime, however, economic self-denial in America is forced to use a different scale from that appropriate for most of the rest of the world. To live on \$10,000 a year would mean real sacrifice for many American families.

On the other hand, let's not kid ourselves about what we need. Many Americans who make \$15,000 or \$20,000 feel that they are on the brink of poverty. They are revolting against taxes, which they feel are taking the bread off their tables. One such family, good friends of mine, has a swimming pool, two cars, two color T.V. sets, and top quality stereo equipment. They take frequent vacations at expensive resorts and often eat out at expensive restaurants. They do not see how they could live on less. Other friends have bought boats and campers, which they feel they must use almost every summer weekend in order to get their money's worth.

These persons remain my close friends. I am too concerned about my own life-style to condemn theirs. But I worry that they and I may have become dependent on possessions for happiness and security to a degree that jeopardizes our relationship with the Lord.

The life-style of American churches also bears examination in the light of Jesus' warning about the danger of wealth. Congregations are spending more money on themselves and less for benevolences. Luxurious new buildings, expensive programs, costly materials, and highly paid pastors all take money which could be used for evangelism or social service. We all know the justification for such expenditures: they are necessary to attract and educate people who will then give more to mission. But this strategy is not working. *Indeed, the only stewardship strategy which will build the mission of the Church is one which calls for personal and congregational self-sacrifice.* God calls his people not to privileged convenience but to costly service. Churches which do not heed this call forfeit their relationship to God as his chosen people. The glory of the church resides less in her towering cathedrals than in her martyred saints. Nothing less than self-sacrifice will work for a person or a church which wants to glorify God and enjoy fellowship with him.

III. *Self-Sacrifice, Credibility, and Sharing*

Self-sacrifice is, secondly, a necessary part of our love to others. We are to love others as Christ loved us and laid down his life for us (Jn.15:12-13). Love for others involves more than giving what we can spare without pain. It means commitment to them and sacrifice for them.

The *Koinonia* of the New Testament church was no trivial socializing with coffee, cookies, and small talk. Rather it was a bond of costly accountability of Christians to one another. Whenever persons were in need, others shared with them. "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of houses or lands sold them. . . and distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35). When Christians in Jerusalem faced financial hardship, their want was supplied by Christians in Macedonia, Galatia, Asia, Ephesus, and other places. Both within local congregations and across ethnic and geographical lines, Christians felt so responsible for one another that those who had much shared with those who had little.

The present economic imbalance between the rich and the poor calls us to the same type of costly sharing which characterized the New Testament church. A total of one billion people are starving or malnourished. U.S. residents use five times as much grain per person as do the citizens of developing countries. The U.S. with 5.6% of the world's population is consuming 42% of the world's aluminum, 44% of its coal, and 63% of its natural gas. One American uses enough resources to support 50 Indonesians.

In the face of such disparity, it seems ludicrous to use the term self-sacrifice for such adjustments as using smaller cars, less electricity and meat, and clothes which have gone out of style. Simple justice demands that we do at least this and much more. Such is not surprising, however, when we remember that self-sacrifice, like justice, is a central requirement, not an additional option, for the Christian. Economic self-sacrifice is one means to justice. Justice is one result of self-sacrifice.

First, self-sacrifice is necessary to establish our credibility as advocates of political and social change. Improving the structures that produce injustice is a crucial part of the church's agenda. Christians must use their influence to persuade the government to reform its food policies and bring about a more just system of international trade. But we must not fail to practice the morality which we urge upon the public. *Major U.S. denominations are failing to realize in their own lives the economic and social standards which they are asking the government to legislate in society.* The result is a loss of credibility. Our political influence will be strengthened if we practice what we preach. The Christian citizens' movement Bread For The World, for example, receives greater respect because its staff members keep their salaries low. The director lives in New York City on less than \$9000.

Second, self-sacrifice is necessary in order to share with others. American Christians could make a significant contribution to the relief of world poverty if they were to give more. Let us assume an income of \$17,177 (1974 median U.S. family income plus 6% yearly increases) for a family of four. Religious donations usually run about 3% or \$515. If this family were to use \$13,000 (the figure is an example only and is probably too high) for its own expenses, it would have to do without some luxuries, but it would still be able to live in comfort. This would leave \$4,177 for others. Let us assume that \$3000 of this is used to fight poverty. A mere 10,000 families could give \$30,000,000. In 1974 the cash disbursements of Church World Service were \$11,500,000; World Vision's were about \$20,000,000. Two million families (a small percentage of American Christians)

using this pattern could provide \$6 billion, more than the amount which, according to the 1974 World Food Congress, developing countries need for investment in agricultural development.

Such aid would have to be used with care to avoid paternalism and increased dependency. But strategies already exist to overcome these obstacles if funds become available. There are limits to the benefits that such aid can bring, but there are also unknown possibilities. Only 5% of American Christians could make a significant impact on world hunger and development needs.

IV. *Self-Sacrifice as Witness*

Third, the self-sacrificing Christian community can become a paradigm which demonstrates the possibility of a life free from bondage to mammon. God calls us to become the kind of redeemed community which points to the existence of his kingdom. By displaying a new quality of life, the church can expose the illusion that wealth and comfort are the primary sources of human happiness. We can exhibit a new pattern of relationships in which people are more important than things. We can show that it is possible to resist the lies of advertising and yet be satisfied. We can manifest the joy gained from human fellowship and from pleasures which are free or inexpensive. In short, we can show that people can live simply in America and still be content, more content than those who live luxuriously.

What will be the impact of such a style of life on those around us? Certainly some people will regard us as odd fanatics. But there is a chance that more than a few persons will be impressed by the freedom we enjoy and will change their values. Following a poll Louis Harris wrote that many Americans were coming to the point "where the accumulation of physical possessions and steadily increasing consumption would no longer be as central to people's concerns. . . . This would mark a striking turnabout in our country's thinking." Many people long to be liberated from the dehumanizing pressures that distort the true value of life. By demonstrating the possibility of a different style of life, the church can help to free some of the rich as well as some of the poor.

Whenever it is possible, such a style of life should be organized by local congregations. When a congregation as a whole is unwilling, groups within congregations or from several congregations can be formed. Members of such groups should be committed to sharing with one another as well as with the poor of the world. If we know that others will help us in times of economic difficulty, we are given added freedom not to store up wealth for ourselves. Groups should talk over family budgets and major purchases in order to reinforce one another's resolve and question one another's rationalizations.

We must rid ourselves of the illusion that the main contribution of American Christians to the war on world poverty lies in our wealth or our political power. That is part of the system's lie which we are fighting. Certainly we should use our wealth and political power, but we should do so in a courageous and exuberant way. We should not hoard wealth and power or be afraid to risk losing them; rather we should employ them with a carefree attitude that shows that we regard them as being of secondary importance.

More significant than our wealth and power is the opportunity we have to

live a simple, self-sacrificing life that manifests our trust in God and our love for one another. The weakness of Jesus Christ on the cross revealed a new type of power which comes not from money and force but from trust and self-sacrificial love. Christians today are called to demonstrate this same power by rejecting the illusions and materialism and living by the providence of God for the well-being of others.

The church as an institution is summoned to give support to Christian individuals and groups who are living simply and to provide channels for them to use the money they are saving. It is also called to a vocation of poverty and self-sacrifice as an institution. Such a vocation means working and worshipping in less expensive buildings or no buildings of its own, combining programs with other denominations, and relying more on work by lay volunteers instead of paid professionals. It means that instead of seeking to be recognized as one of the powers in the world, the church must rely less upon its wealth and political connections and more upon the power which God can only demonstrate through those who are willing to be weak and poor for him. At the least, the church will have to divest itself of all investments and endowments which put profits and interest rates above the welfare of the disadvantaged people of the world.

V. ILLUSIONS OF SELF-FULFILLMENT

Since self-sacrifice is an indispensable part of love to God and neighbor, it is obviously necessary for self-fulfillment. Paradoxically, we only find fulfillment in our lives when we are willing to give them up. Jesus said: “. . . whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it” (Mk.8:35). This conception of self-fulfillment runs counter to all the prevailing conceptions which hold that self-fulfillment is getting ahead or getting more. Christians should know better. Human self-fulfillment should not be confused with winning—or even joining—the rat race, which is more appropriate for rats than persons.

One illusion holds that self-fulfillment comes from possessions. We are important because of what we have and what we consume. Persons of greater worth own bigger houses and bigger cars. Buying things becomes the only visible way of acquiring a sense of identity and value. New cars, furniture, and T.V. sets are signs that our life is a success.

Wealth which is sought in this way does not satisfy and does not fulfill life. Instead, it removes from life the very qualities which makes us human. It tends to take away our freedom and courage, our kindness and compassion for others, and our ability to see or feel the poverty of others. It separates us from the poor in both space and spirit.

Most of the rich never see a child whose life is ebbing away slowly because of some disease caused by malnutrition. Most never agonize over a child who cannot learn because of irreversible brain damage. Many resent paying taxes that help welfare recipients. Most of the poor of the world must feel that Americans have the same unconcern as the rich man showed toward Lazarus (Lk.16:19-21). We like to think of ourselves as generous. Yet we give only 0.24% of our GNP for overseas development assistance. Does not such hardness of

heart indicate a life that is unfulfilled?

The second major illusion of our day holds that self-fulfillment comes from power. This may be the power to move up the company ladder or to change the political system. It may be the power to get a job or to be heard. At least, it is the power to direct one's own future; it may also include the power to direct the future of others.

Being fully human does mean accepting responsibility for one's own future. God means for human beings to be creative subjects who make decisions rather than passive objects of a process determined by others. We must applaud and join in efforts to liberate persons from patterns of servility.

But when is a person liberated? Were Paul and Silas, bound in jail, liberated? Was Jesus Christ, nailed to a cross, liberated? Merely to ask these questions indicates that the liberation which Christ offers may be different from political and social liberation. Though oppression stunts human creativity and aggravates human suffering, one can be oppressed and still live with integrity, faith, and love. *For the oppressed, self-fulfillment is difficult; for the oppressors, it is impossible.*

Every liberation movement runs the risk of copying the arrogance of former masters. Women will not find fulfillment by becoming as domineering as men, nor blacks, by becoming as oppressive as whites, nor the poor by becoming as self-seeking as the rich.

Poverty and oppression distort life, but wealth and political liberation alone do not bring self-fulfillment. What is needed is a cure for anxiety. Anxiety is the source both of pride and of servility, of efforts to be more than human and of acquiescence to a life less than human. Anxiety causes the powerful to seek greater power and the weak to be afraid to use the power they have. Because of their anxiety, both the American executive and the Indonesian peasant are afraid to buck the system that confines them. Because of his anxiety Herod the king ordered the male children of Bethlehem killed to secure his power; because of their anxiety the children of Israel wanted to return to the secure slavery of Egypt rather than risking the dangers of the Promised Land. The same anxiety that causes persons to take away the freedom of others keeps them from being free themselves.

VI. *Self-Denial and Self-Fulfillment*

The cure for anxiety is trust in the security offered by God the Father and loyalty to his cause as more important than our own. Being anxious about self is the opposite of denying one's self. It is putting self, not God, at the center of our world. Freedom from anxiety comes through self-denial, which recognizes God as absolute Lord. Self-denial thus brings the freedom to risk one's property and power—even one's life—for God and the freedom to give up one's wealth and rights—even one's life—for others.

Self-denial gives us the courage both to fight for our rights and those of others and to give up those rights. A multitude of models exist. Gandhi and Martin Luther King insisted on the rights of their people, yet showed love and concern for their oppressors and were willing to risk suffering, humiliation, and

death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of a God who meets persons in their strength and adulthood but who also calls persons to be aware of Christ only and not of self. In his life and death Bonhoeffer demonstrated the compatibility of human adulthood and self-denial.

The apostle Paul was a clear example of a person who insisted upon his rights while being willing to give them up. He defended the rights of himself and other apostles to receive pay. Yet he did not use these rights in order not to "put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (1 Cor.9:1-18). He made clear his freedom from Jewish law; yet he was willing to observe Jewish law in order to win Jews (1 Cor.8:19-20). He insisted upon the freedom of Christians to eat meat which might once have been part of an idol's sacrifice; he wanted no overscrupulous legalism. But he advised against eating such meat if it would damage the faith of some sensitive person (1 Cor.10:23-11:1). Paul's advice to pastors today might be to insist upon salaries that are on a par with the members of their congregations and then to give away a large proportion of those salaries.

Paul's own model, of course, was Christ, who combined freedom and self-sacrifice. Christ was free to use his power to save himself, but he used his freedom to surrender his life in order to save humankind. He insisted that his followers recognize his divine authority; yet while he was still our Lord, he also became our servant, who was humiliated and killed for us. His life of perfect trust in the Father and of resolute self-giving to other persons shows us what it means to be fully human.

Self-fulfillment comes to one who is filled with this spirit of Christ. It comes to one who loves life but is not afraid to lose it, to one who receives things and power as gifts, not to be clutched but to be used and risked and shared.