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Christ, The Center

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One reason I appreciate the Quaker tradition so deeply is the way that Friends simplify all else in order to heighten the spiritual reality of the Present Christ. From the testimony of the Quaker "patriarch" (about one, even Christ Jesus, who speaks to our conditions) to the "sacramental community" (which upholds the promise that where two or three are gathered in his name, Christ is present in their midst), Friends seek to experience in the present tense what it means to live under the Power of the Resurrected Lord.

The apostle used the analogy of Christ as the "cornerstone" of our faith. Our Lord used the analogy of the solid rock — a solid foundation, without which no sturdy structure can be built. I speak of Christ the *center*: The center of our faith, the center of our relationships, and the center of our lives. Not until recently have I seen the importance of Professor Butterfield's words, "Cling to Christ, and to all else be uncommitted."

1. Christ Is the Center of Our Faith

Christ is the center of our faith because He portrays God's nature in the clearest way possible. While all of creation reveals something about the Creator (by the works one knows the workman) God's nature is revealed uniquely through his Son, Jesus Christ. John says, "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) And Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." (John 10:30) "He who has seen me, has seen the Father." (John 14:9) Thus, the revelational importance of our Lord's mission lies in our realization that God is *like* Jesus Christ. By looking at Jesus Christ, we see God more clearly.

We discover that God is not vindictive, but forgiving because Jesus forgave — even those who nailed him to a cross.

We see that God exalts and cares for the meek and lowly because Jesus gathered children in

Christ, The Center

by Paul Anderson

his arms and said, "suffer these little ones to come to me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

And we know that God loves *us* because Jesus laid down his life that we might have Life, and have it most abundantly.

Jesus Christ is the center of our faith because we know so much more about him than we do about the other two members of the trinity. Both the Nicene and the Apostles' Creeds say twice as

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much about the Son than they do about the Father and Spirit combined. The reason for this is that there is much more historical information about Jesus Christ. In logic, we proceed from that which we know well toward that which we know less. Therefore, it makes sense when seeking to know who God is, that we begin with the incarnate revelation of God. As a child put it, "Jesus is the best picture God ever had taken."

Because we know that Jesus Christ lived in history, and because we have a record of how he was experienced by the early Christian community, we know we have a solid point upon which to build our faith. Archimedes, the Greek mathematician, said, "Give me a place to stand and I can move the entire earth." He was speaking about the importance of a steady fulcrum in leverage. Moving an object has less to do with its weight than the leverage of the mover. Speaking by analogy, Jesus Christ is to our faith what a solid fulcrum is to leverage. He is our "place to stand." And we know that the closer the fulcrum is to the object to be moved, the greater the power of the leverage.

By looking at Jesus Christ we see clearly what God is like; yet through him we experience God's love.

2. Jesus Christ Is the Center of Our Relationships

Knowing about God can never substitute for an intimate relationship *with* God. Whereas once God was perceived as being distant and unaffected by the affairs of "mortals," the incarnation of God's son offers a dramatically new approach. As opposed to regarding the Creator as an impersonal force with whom we have no interaction, we can now respond to our Creator in loving relationship. As opposed to being an "I-it" relationship, ours is transformed into an "I-Thou" relationship (Buber) because God is come to us in the form of a person, Jesus Christ.

As he becomes the center of our relationships, we find that another transformation begins to occur. Not only do we begin to relate to

others in the light of God's love for them, but we find that our perception of who we are is also being changed. Because people become most like the object of their worship, when Jesus Christ becomes the focus of our adoration (as opposed to some abstract idea), we find that we begin to actualize our fullest potential as *personal* beings. With the exchange of love between the Divine Lover and us as his beloved we find that all things become new. We begin to see that it's not *who* we are that matters, but *whose* we are that counts.

When we come to grips with God's love reaching out to us through Jesus Christ, our lives can never be the same. Because of our awareness of our inadequacies, we may feel compelled to hide from our Creator lest we be ashamed, or to hide from fellow humans lest we be rejected, or to hide from ourselves lest we discover that the persons we are and the persons we hope to be are divorced beyond recognition. In the midst of acknowledging our unworthiness before God's glory, we are nevertheless confronted with *grace*. Grace dictates "I don't care who you are or what you've done, I love you. Trust me. Just trust me."

These are the "words of life." They mark the beginning of a new creation in which all things are becoming new. With the triumph of grace comes the humbling realization that the one who knows us best loves us most. It is therefore not surprising that when the love of Jesus Christ assumes the central place in our relationships, we are freed to pass on his love to others.

As the center of our relationships, he sets the captives free. Those who are enslaved by self-defeating patterns are emancipated by the Power of the Resurrected Lord. Those who are bound by selfish pride find their arrogance melting into humble adoration as they acknowledge the Glory of His presence. And for those of us whose lives lay hostage to fear, his love reaching out to us brings release. For perfect love casts out all fear.

As we make Jesus Christ the center of our relationships, we find that we are not only able to accept ourselves for who we are, but we are enabled to reach out to others with the very love which he provides. We serve one another because of our Lord's example, and in serving (even the least of) those around us we minister unto our Lord.

Just as Jesus Christ came to be the Word of God incarnate, we also are to "incarnate" the very ministry which he began. In doing so, he becomes the center of our lives.

With the triumph of grace comes the humbling realization that the one who knows us best loves us most.

3. Jesus Christ Is the Center of Our Lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that when we are confronted by Jesus Christ, we have two ways of responding. Either we die to self, or else we put Christ to death.

Every time the way of Christ is forsaken for violence, every time his calling to forgive is ignored because of pride, every time his invitation of love is refused, the tragedy of the crucifixion is once more enacted in history. The good news of the gospel, however, is that the tragedy of the crucifixion, real though it may be, is *not* final. The sting of death, itself, is overcome by the Power of the Resurrected Lord. It is within this awesome reality that those who would commit themselves to his Lordship seek to live.

Perhaps an analogy to a bicycle wheel would be appropriate here. If the interests of our lives can be compared to the spokes of a wheel, then Christ, our center, must be symbolized by the hub of the wheel. If any spoke be disconnected to the hub, it rattles and actually impedes the function of the wheel. Much more important than the color or appearance of the "spoke" is its connectedness to the "hub," the center of our being, Jesus Christ. Therefore, our primary question regarding our interests in life is "how does this interest affect my life with respect to my center?" If the spoke remains disconnected, the wheel would be better off without it.

This picture of living under Christ's Lordship is entirely radical. Not radical in the sense that it is to be considered novel or unusual, Watchman Nee would call it the "normal" Christian life. It is *radical* in the sense that it deals with the *heart* of the issue. No one can serve two masters. To say that Jesus Christ is Lord is to say that all others are not.

William Hazlitt records the account of a discussion around a dinner table in which the great Charles Lamb and his students shared about whom they should like to greet upon entering the "pearly gates." The various ones shared quite meaningfully about how they would like to greet Plato, and Newton, and Shakespeare, and so on. Finally, the turn came for Lamb to speak and after a pause, he began slowly, (quoted loosely) "There is one not yet mentioned whom I should like to greet. If Shakespeare should enter the room, we would most certainly stand. But if this other should enter the room, surely we would all drop to our knees and kiss the hem of his garment."

The Present Christ stands before us each. He persistently draws us to himself through the otherwise "common" events of life. He desires to be our Lord, and he deserves that we make him our center — the center of our faith, the center of our relations, and the center of our lives. Q