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The Narrow Way

Jesus said that the way to living for ever is a 'narrow' one. What does that mean?

by James McBride

Christians cling to the concept of living for ever. It is 'eternity', 'heaven', 'Paradise', 'the Kingdom', the 'beatific vision'. It's the end package of the Christian pilgrimage. When life is over on Earth it's off to enjoy an eternity of blissfully companying God.

Perhaps two billion Christians nourish this notion, at least somewhere in the back of their minds. Yet Jesus tells us that: "...*narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and few there be who find it*" (Matthew 7:14). Picture squeezing through a narrow gap and being faced with a dangerous rock-strewn path over swamps and through dense undergrowth! On the other hand the gate that leads to destruction, Jesus says, is wide and the way broad. By this you will join the multitude of Christians strolling down a wide well-trodden boulevard - but headed for destruction. Just what did Jesus mean?

For some Christians this 'narrow way' means following a tightly restricted path of doctrinal purity. Veer marginally from that path and you tumble over the precipice to eternal death. Is this what Jesus' instruction signifies?

Let's look at some examples. Would eating - even inadvertently - a slice of pork despatch you to your knees in abject repentance, or eternal death? What about eating out on the Sabbath? Or smoking? Or forgetting - or using - a tithe, or observing a birthday, or voting in secular - or even church - elections, or failing to wear a hat in church, or wearing make-up, or taking medication or submitting to the surgeon's knife? All such are considered by some as practices that cause the 'true' Christian to stumble from the Way.

More seriously, perhaps, would be a divorce - especially if re-marriage were involved. Then there's a failure to observe the Biblical holy days. Such practices, say some church leaders and hence many of their followers, lead to eternal death.

What would be the penalty imposed by God for such failures? Illness? The 'Great Tribulation'? 'Hell-fire'? If so, then we need to take this very seriously indeed.

The Scriptures certainly have strong words against those who add to - or take away from - God's revelation. One example is substituting humanly-devised days for worship for what God has revealed. The people of Israel found this out to their painful cost. They lost homes and jobs and family, were carted off to distant lands.

There are, too, certain false teachings which can 'overthrow the faith of some'. And there are strongly-condemned teachings which are 'anti-Christ'. A serious charge. Teachings that cause division - heresy, sects - in the Body of Christ are also roundly condemned in Scripture.

But is there a 'line' past which a practice becomes sin? Is it okay to take an analgesic or set a fractured bone or extract or fill a rotten tooth or have 'alternative' treatments - but sin to have chemotherapy or to remove a poisonous appendix? Such matters become, for many Christians, serious doctrinal issues.

Precious time is consumed in worrying over the minutiae of doctrine. Rather than our Christian walk being a joyful pilgrimage - certainly with many ups and downs - it becomes one of painful introspection. It leads, sadly, to a self-righteous condemnation of all 'weaker brethren' and to exclusivism, a paranoid rejection of everything outside our own small circle, a 'remnant' mentality.

Consider, however, another aspect of 'the narrow way' - *how we live day-to-day.*

Human Nature

Life can be - often is - tough. Christian or not, all of us are burdened with a nature that constantly drags us from the

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right path - even when our standards are self-drawn and not necessarily Biblical. And how much more when compared to the standard set by Jesus Christ in his daily walk while among us. We are to be *'imitators of God as [His] dear children'* (Ephesians 5:1).

Even with the indwelling Spirit of God, a Christian is in a battle - with his own nature (different for you than for me), with the encroaching world and its ties, with the 'wiles of the devil'. What of anger, and pride, and sexual sin, and pointing the finger, and back-stabbing - even in the mind. What of covetousness and tax-dodging and selfishness. What of consumerism and greed and 'the fat plague'. Or alcoholism and top-shelf magazines?

The apostle Paul was very specific: "*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God?*" he asks (I Corinthians 6:9). Does he then proceed to list specific doctrinal errors? *Not at all*. Here's what excludes us from the Kingdom: "*Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor homosexuals nor sodomites nor thieves nor covetous nor drunkards nor revilers nor extortioners will inherit the Kingdom of God*".

Only 'idolaters' - false worship, a rejection of any of the first four of the Ten Commandments - can be classed in this list as 'doctrinal'. Because these are the identifying sign through all ages of the people of God. Miss these and all else could simply be enlightened humanism.

Earlier in this chapter the apostle is furious with Christians who go to litigation with other brethren (v.1ff). Elsewhere (Ephesians 5) he provides a further listing of these sins: *'don't lie to one another...don't get angry...don't allow the devil a foothold...don't steal but work to provide for the needs of others...don't grieve the holy Spirit'*. All are the sure way to divert us from 'the narrow way'.

Theologians bite and devour one another over doctrinal issues which are often insoluble or open to alternative interpretation. Yet the heart is not right. But, says the apostle, "*be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another - even as God in Christ forgave you*" (v.32).

As 'dear children' God permits, for each of us, the experiences we need to develop the 'fruits of the Spirit'. These are the characteristics of God Himself, the 'mind of

Jesus Christ'. Given the Spirit through laying-on of hands following our baptism, over time our character weaknesses are strengthened by carefully-monitored (by God) trials. As we co-operate we stay on that 'difficult path' with the help of our Father. Our doctrinal perception may not be perfect - but we begin - as a light - to reflect the divine nature in our day-to-day walk.

Kingdom of God

"*Repent and be baptized*" said the apostle Peter "*and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit*" (Acts 2:38). Repentance is a heart-felt turning to God and His revealed way of life, a turning round of our life, our willing submission to 'every word of God'.

A newly-converted Christian simply won't have every nuance of doctrine locked in place. It's a matter of often slow and painful growth, adding doctrinal brick upon brick through the rest of life.

If his or her life were cut short before the perfect doctrinal wall were built - would salvation be lost? *No* - our salvation depends on the merits of Jesus Christ. When the Spirit is given upon true repentance our past is forgiven and we are in the loving hands of our heavenly Father. Unless we personally choose to 'blow it' we will remain a part of His Family.

The Kingdom of God is not an opportunity to strum on a harp on cloud nine. The Kingdom is a busy, active, powerful divine spiritual force that will eventually rule the universe from planet Earth. If you have God's Spirit you will be a part of that force. Your role is determined by the degree you become, in this life, like Jesus Christ.

It's each Christian's responsibility to actively "*put off, concerning your former conduct the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man which was created according to God in true righteousness and holiness*" (Ephesians 2:22-24).

Simply 'getting it wrong' or even just partially right on some doctrine won't exclude you -usually - from that Kingdom. The important teachings are writ large in Scripture - plain for all with a willing mind to see.

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